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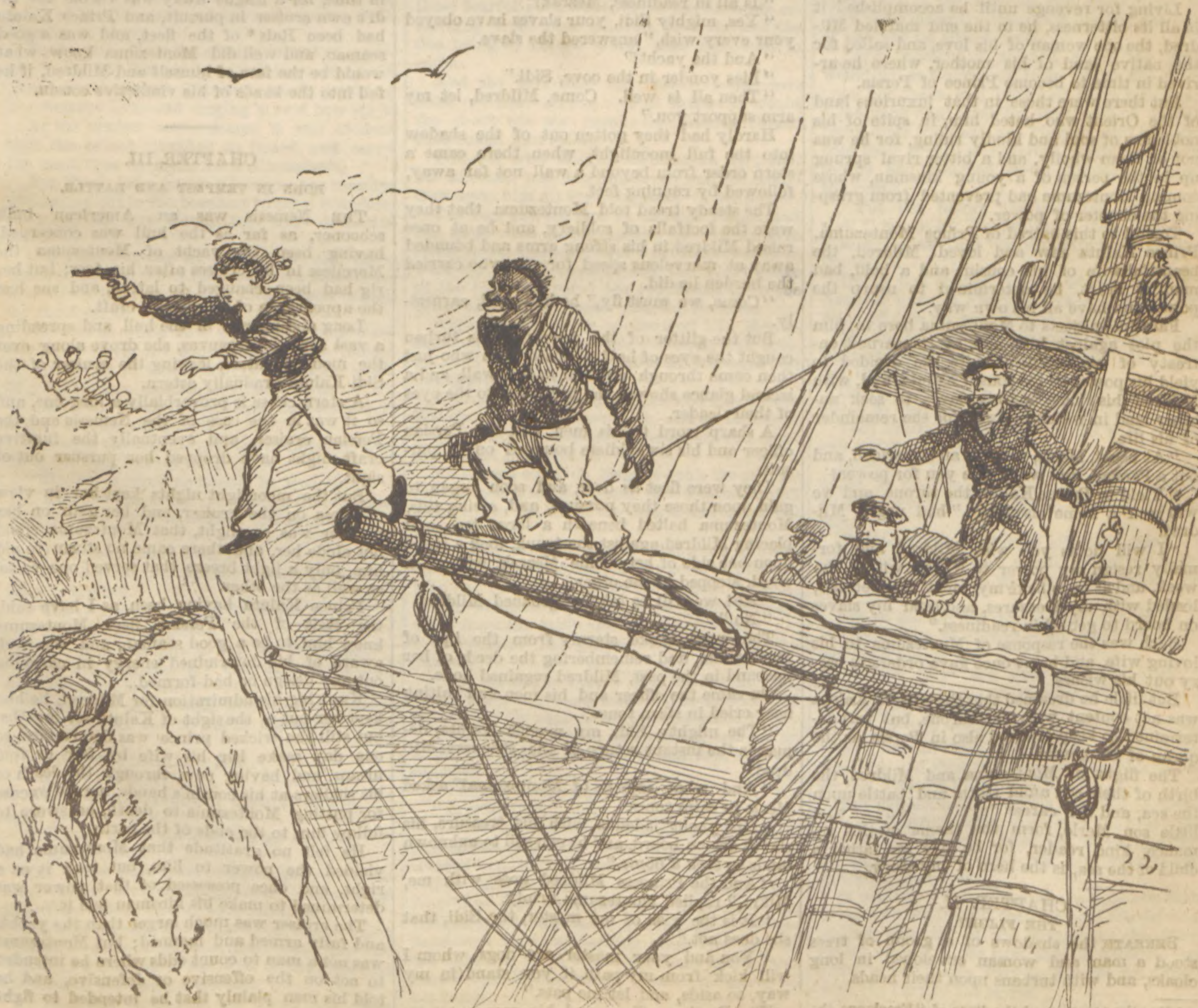
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No. 245.

MERLE, THE MIDDY: or, THE HEIR OF AN OCEAN FREELANCE.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,

AUTHOR OF "MERLE, THE MUTINEER," "MONTEZUMA, THE MERCILESS," ETC., ETC., ETC.



"A THOUSAND DOLLARS EACH FOR THE LIFE OF THAT BOY AND BLACK HOUND," SHOUTED THE BUCCANEER, IN FRENZIED TONES FROM THE DECK.

Merle, the Middy;

OR,
The Heir of an Ocean Freelance.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
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CHAPTER I.

DOGGED BY DESTINY.

It was a dark era for the fair land of Persia.

Two years before a strange heir had been called to the throne, a man whose mother had been a Persian princess, and whose father had been an American, whom a cruel destiny had sent drifting about the wide world on sea and land, now a prisoner to a cruel Moorish master, again a captain of a corsair craft, and in the end known by the name of Freelance the Buccaneer, one of the most noted rovers of the Southern waters.

Born upon the ocean, the son of Zulah, the Persian princess, and Freelance the Buccaneer, was a veritable child of the sea, and from a "Waif of the Waves," became first known to history as Merle the Mutineer, and after cruel misfortunes into which Fate led him, arose like a star in its glory, as Montezuma the Merciless,* whose revenge upon his foes even today brings shudders to the hearts of those who know them as they were.

Living for revenge until he accomplished it in all its bitterness, he in the end married Mildred, the one woman of his love, and sailed for the native land of his mother, where he arrived in time to become Prince of Persia.

But there were those in that luxurious land of the Orient who hated him, in spite of his nobleness of soul and kindly ruling, for he was not of them wholly, and a bitter rival sprung up in the person of a young kinsman, whose coming Montezuma had prevented from grasping the cimeter of power.

To add to this hatred of Prince Montezuma, Prince Kaluta saw and loved Mildred, the beautiful wife of his cousin; and a bold, bad man at heart, he determined to usurp the power and have all his own way.

Faithful subjects to Montezuma bore to him the plot against him, and at the earnest entreaty of his beautiful wife, he decided to yield his power to his cousin Kaluta, and, with Mildred, his riches and his slaves, to seek another land in which to dwell for the remainder of his life.

"At heart, Merle, you are an American, and not a Persian, and what care you for power?"

"Yield to Prince Kaluta the throne, and we will seek a home elsewhere," had urged Mildred.

"I will do as you wish, Mildred, and formally resign my power to Kaluta within the week, and at once have my yacht, the Nemesis, loaded with my treasures, and send my slaves on board to get all in readiness."

Such was the response of Montezuma to his loving wife, and he at once gave orders to carry out his wishes.

But little he dreamed that the wicked Kaluta was not content with the throne, but was determined to keep Mildred also in Persia as the queen of his harem.

The flight of Montezuma and Mildred, the birth of their son amid storm and battle upon the sea, and the career of that little son, Merle, form the theme of this romance, kind reader, for he, like his father a child of the sea, is the hero of my story.

CHAPTER II.

THE FLIGHT.

BENEATH the shadows of a group of trees stood a man and woman enveloped in long cloaks, and with turbans upon their heads.

* For the romance of the lives of "Freelance the Buccaneer," see DIME LIBRARY No. 94; "Merle the Mutineer," DIME LIBRARY No. 103; "Montezuma the Merciless," DIME LIBRARY No. 104.

The moonlight rendered the scene one of silvery beauty, and cast light enough within the shadows to reveal the tall, commanding form of the man and the slender, shrinking form of the woman, for she clung to him as though in dread of danger.

"Mezrak comes, and we will soon know all," said the man in a low tone, as a dark form came toward the group of trees.

The moonlight, falling upon the one approaching, revealed an Abyssinian slave, black as ebony and attired in rich, oriental garb.

His body was large and long, his legs stout and short, and his arms of huge length, while his head was massive and the face revealed courage, indomitable will and cunning.

He came at a swift pace to the trees, and, raising his clasped hands to his brow, bent low at the sight of those standing there, and said in the Persian tongue, and a voice that was soft and pleasant to hear:

"Mighty Sidi, the yacht is ready, and the Prince Kaluta is wild with rage that you disobeyed his will, and is to pursue in his armed cruiser."

"Ha! he would tear you from me, my beautiful Mildred, as faithful Valik told me was his intention, and you have suspected; but he will find the crew of the Nemesis subject to my will, not his, and woe be unto him if he follow me to sea," said Montezuma, for he it was whom Mezrak had addressed.

"Come, then, Merle, let us hasten," cried Mildred, nervously.

"Is all in readiness, Mezrak?"

"Yes, mighty Sidi, your slaves have obeyed your every wish," answered the slave.

"And the yacht?"

"Lies yonder in the cove, Sidi."

"Then all is well. Come, Mildred, let my arm support you."

Hardly had they gotten out of the shadow into the full moonlight, when there came a stern order from beyond a wall not far away, followed by running feet.

The steady tread told Montezuma that they were the footfalls of soldiery, and he at once raised Mildred in his strong arms and bounded away at marvelous speed for one who carried the burden he did.

"Come, we must fly," he had said, earnestly.

But the glitter of the jewels in his turban caught the eyes of half a dozen men who just then came through a portal in the wall, and a second glance showed the fugitives to the eyes of their leader.

A sharp word to his men, and the Persian officer and his six soldiers bounded on in pursuit.

They were fleet as deer, and soon began to gain upon those they pursued, and, seeing this, Montezuma halted beneath a large tree, and placing Mildred against the trunk, took a stand upon one side of her, while Mezrak, without a word, stepped to the other.

"Ah! we will be taken," groaned Mildred.

"No!"

The word broke sternly from the lips of Montezuma, and remembering the deeds of her husband in the past, Mildred regained hope.

On came the officer and his men and halting near cried in stern tones:

"The mighty Sidi, my master Kaluta, demands the instant return of the Princess Mildred."

"And what says he of Montezuma?" asked Merle in calm tones.

"His yacht is laden with his treasure, his slaves are on board, and he can sail to unknown lands to seek a home."

"And the Princess Mildred goes with me, Mikra," replied Montezuma firmly.

"It is the wish of my master, the Sidi, that she does not."

"You and your master are dogs whom I will kick from my path if you stand in my way, so aside, and let me pass."

The Persian officer and his men were astounded and horrified at this insult to their mighty ruler, who had ascended to power only

the day before, and instantly they drew their cimeters.

"Will you stand aside, Mikra, and let us pass?" said Montezuma drawing his own weapon, and his act being followed by Mezrak, the slave.

"Do you dare disobey the Sidi's command?"

"Yes."

"I shall punish you then as you deserve," and the Persian officer called to his men, and they all rushed upon the brave man.

There were fiery serpents seen in midair in the moonlight, there was heard the ringing of steel against steel, and then came a groan, a fall, a shriek of agony, and two men bounded away from the fatal spot, and five others lay dead at the feet of Montezuma and his slave, while Mildred had sunk down against the tree-trunk in a faint.

Raising Mildred in his arms, Montezuma bounded on his way, followed by Mezrak, for he well knew that the two guards of the Sidi would report all, and others would come, and to disobey the command of Prince Kaluta meant instant death.

A run of half a mile brought them to the shore, off which lay a small and graceful vessel, her sails set, and the waves causing her to tug impatiently at her anchor.

A boat was at the shore, and springing into this Montezuma, Mildred and the slave were soon upon the vessel's deck.

Five minutes after the pretty craft was flying away from the inhospitable shore, and just in time, for a league away was visible the Sidi's own cruiser in pursuit, and Prince Kaluta had been Rais* of the fleet, and was a good seaman, and well did Montezuma know what would be the fate of himself and Mildred, if he fell into the hands of his vindictive cousin.

CHAPTER III.

BORN IN TEMPEST AND BATTLE.

THE Nemesis was an American built schooner, as far as the hull was concerned, having been the yacht of Montezuma the Merciless in his cruises after his foes; but her rig had been changed to lateen, and she had the appearance of an oriental craft.

Long and narrow in the hull, and spreading a vast surface of canvas, she drove along over the moonlit waters, leaving the cruiser of the Sidi Kaluta gradually astern.

A stern chase is proverbially a long one, and so it was in the case of the Nemesis and the Persian cruiser, and eventually the fugitive craft might have dropped her pursuer out of sight.

But the moonlight nights kept her in view of those on the cruiser, and her gain on her pursuer was so slight, that Montezuma could not elude her, and there came no storm to aid him, only a light breeze that served one vessel as well as the other.

Prince Kaluta having been, as I have said, the Rais of the Persian fleet, Montezuma knew him to be a good seaman, and was well aware of his determined energy in carrying out any design he had formed.

Knowing his admiration for Mildred, he had kept her out of the sight of Kaluta for months; but still the wicked prince was determined to one day make her his wife by fair or foul means, and having now, through the death of his soldiers at his cousin's hands, a good excuse for putting Montezuma to death, he swore to follow him to the ends of the earth.

He felt no gratitude that Montezuma had yielded the power to him, but took it as a right, and once possessed of that power was determined to make his kinsman feel it.

The cruiser was much larger than the yacht, and fully armed and manned; but Montezuma was not a man to count odds where he intended to act on the offensive or defensive, and he told his men plainly that he intended to fight to the death.

* Captain.

The crew, for the most part, were men of Mexico, with a sprinkling of all nations, who had served with him before his reign in Persia, and they numbered hardly two score; but he had a few Nubian and Abyssinian slaves on board, and he well knew that the cruiser could gain no easy victory over him.

His determination was to seek America, and there find a home to settle down in for the remainder of his days, and he crowded the yacht with all the canvas she could stagger under in hope of escape.

But suddenly he saw a dark cloud in the West, just as the cruiser was within range, for as the wind had increased and the waters grown rough, the hull of the larger vessel had forged faster through the waves.

"That storm will save us, Mezrak," said Montezuma, addressing the slave who had aided him in his fight with the soldiers, and who was his favorite body-servant, and one he knew he could wholly trust.

"The Sidi knows," said Mezrak, with deep respect in tone and manner.

On with increased speed under the rising wind, and without taking in an inch of canvas, the fugitive craft flew along, until suddenly the cruiser, who was creeping up fast, luffed and sent a broadside after her foe.

It was well aimed, cut away the bow-sprit, and brought the main lateen sail down to the deck with a run.

"Clear the decks! Prepare for action!"

The orders broke in ringing tones from the voice of Montezuma, and his crew sprung with alacrity to obey.

In the mean time the cruiser rushed on, pouring in her hot fire, under which the men of the yacht found it most difficult to work, repairing the damage done and rigging a new bow-sprit.

As the cruiser came nearer it was evident that the prince intended to board and carry the craft thus by main force of numbers.

But Montezuma gave orders to open heavily, and called out to the boarders to repel boarders, selecting all his slaves for this desperate work.

One glance he cast at the cruiser, and then, turning, dashed down into the cabin and threw himself by the side of the divan upon which lay the form of Mildred.

She was as white as a ghost, her eyes were closed, and over her were bending two female servants, one of whom held in her arms a roll of silk that enveloped a tiny baby form.

"Mildred, speak to me," said Montezuma in a low, earnest tone.

The eyes slowly opened and a smile hovered upon the lips, but no word came.

"Toolah, is there no hope?" he moaned.

"You are preparing for action, Sidi?" asked the old slave nurse in answer to the question.

"Yes."

"Then she cannot live, Sidi."

"See, her life is flickering now, and the battle will kill her."

"Yet it must be fought, Toolah."

"The Sidi knows best."

"The prince is here to tear her from me."

"He will find but her clay should he conquer you, mighty Sidi."

"And the child?" and Montezuma glanced furtively at the roll of silk in the arms of the nurse.

"Is a brave little boy, Sidi."

"She has seen it?"

"Yes, Sidi, and smiled upon it as she did upon you just now."

"Heaven grant she live to rear the boy, our boy, to manhood."

The words were uttered like a prayer would have been, and, stooping over, Montezuma kissed the white face of poor Mildred.

Then he turned and imprinted a kiss upon the brow of the tiny babe, just come into the world in the midst of the roar of the guns and howling of the coming tempest.

With stern, white face the brave man then returned to the deck to meet whatever fate was in store for him with the fearless front he had ever shown in direst danger.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SEA FIGHT.

WHEN Montezuma again stood on the deck he found the moon hidden from sight and dark clouds scurrying ominously across the heavens.

The sea was tossing wildly, and the yacht struggling hard, as once more it gained headway.

But there, not half a dozen cables distant, was the cruiser, and her guns were flashing forth red flame, which Sudah, the *Bash-Sota Rais** of Montezuma, was returning with a will from the small cannon on board the *Nemesis*.

The crew were stripped for the fray, and worked their guns and the vessel well, while the boarders, a fierce, motley set, stood ready for the savage combat they knew must come.

Fiercer and fiercer grew the combat as the vessels drew nearer together, and more savage grew the sea and looked the skies, until it was an appalling sight.

But Montezuma's brave heart did not quail, although he well knew he was to fight treble the number he could bring into action, and a demon foe in Prince Kaluta.

Nearer and nearer the cruiser came to the *Nemesis*, pouring in a terrific fire, that strewed her decks with dead and dying, shattering her bulwarks and rigging, and threatened to sink her.

But calm and stern stood Montezuma, a great sorrow in his heart, for he felt that those fearful guns would drive the little life remaining from poor Mildred, his wife, and the one being in all the world that held him to earth.

And the tiny baby boy, whose young ears must resound with the roar of artillery, would the shock not also break the slender thread that bound him to life?

But, die who might, Montezuma felt that his kinsman was the murderer, and he would visit upon him all the vengeance in his power.

The vessels were now at musket range, and the guns were firing rapidly, the waves were rising in fury, and heaven's artillery joined in with the roar of cannon; and the vivid glare of the lightning paled the red flashes from the broadsides of the cruiser and the *Nemesis*.

Apparently bearing a charmed life, Montezuma stood upon his deck, directing the combat, and seemingly unmindful of the dead and dying around him.

A vivid flash of lightning showed him Prince Kaluta on the cruiser's deck, and springing to a gun he ordered it double shotted, and himself aimed and fired it.

There was a cry of distress upon the cruiser that followed the shot, and Montezuma smiled grimly, for he hoped he had killed his cruel kinsman.

But another vivid flash of lightning showed him still alive, and at his feet several officers, who had fallen victims to the well-aimed shot.

That moment Toolah, unheeding the danger, came from the cabin and stood by his side.

"My wife!" he gasped, as he beheld the woman.

"She seemed to revive with the battle, Sidi, and I had every hope, until a treacherous shot cut it way through the cabin and killed her."

"Oh, God!" groaned Montezuma, and for an instant he seemed unmanned; but then he cried eagerly:

"The child—my boy?"

"Is safe, Sidi."

"Praise to Heaven! But go, good Toolah, and shield my boy from harm, and I will avenge her, whom I loved more than life."

The calm sorrow of Montezuma was more fearful to look upon than had he broken into wailing grief, and there was that in his stern, handsome face and flashing eyes that showed the fight was to be one to the very death, and that Prince Kaluta would receive no mercy at his hands.

The cruiser was now almost aboard the yacht, and the guns of each were flashing fast,

* Second Lieutenant.

adding their red glare to the vivid lightning that seemed to incessantly rend the heavens in twain, while the roar of the tempest rushing across the sea was terrible.

It was evidently the intention of Prince Kaluta to board the yacht and capture her before the storm coming down upon them should strike in all its fury.

For this purpose, although he risked sinking the smaller vessel by the shock of colliding, he ordered his helmsman to lay the cruiser's bows over the stern of the yacht, which was most skillfully done.

Then over the bows of the cruiser came pouring the Persian sailors by the score.

But ere one-third the number ordered to board could get footing, and while the prince was preparing to spring upon the yacht, a huge wave tore the two vessels apart, snapping the grapnels as though they had been cords.

Another wave dragged the yacht a length away from her enemy, and just then the storm broke in all its fury, the darkness seemed impenetrable, and all hands had to turn to the first duty of saving the vessels, or go down in the merciless flood.

CHAPTER V.

FOR A BROTHER'S SINS.

THE tempest that had rushed down upon the battling vessels, as if furious with man for showing anger against his fellow-man upon the mighty domain of the storm-king, tore them apart, and in the darkness and spray-filled air they were instantly separated beyond the sight of any eye on either craft.

For a moment it seemed as if the yacht would never stagger up from under the floods upon her decks, and here and there was heard a snapping and crashing, that told of damage being done to vessel and rigging, and her crew held their breath and waited, while the Persian sailors had crouched down forward to await the result.

"Put her before the gale, for she rides it well," came in Montezuma's stern tones, as soon as he saw that the yacht nobly withstood the shock.

Under just enough canvas to steady her the *Nemesis* was put away before the storm, and went off like an arrow from a bow.

She reeled under the pressure, dragged huge waves astern, and dived deep now and then, but she was safe.

Once this was a settled fact Montezuma called to his crew to rally around him.

They knew well the bent of his wild humor, and quickly obeyed.

In spite of the storm, and the danger to the yacht, he intended to fight it out upon the decks with the Persians who had so daringly boarded him.

He knew that they were slightly superior in force, and there was a tall, elegantly robed form in their midst, who he knew would lead them well.

But he had eluded the cruiser, and those of her crew who had boarded his yacht must take her from him or die.

"Come! there are your foes," he cried in ringing tones to his crew, addressing them in the Persian tongue.

He had left three men at the wheel, with orders how to steer, had locked up the cabin securely, and then, with his crew and his slaves, rushed forward to the attack.

The Persian leader and his men had crouched down in the fore-castle, to see how the first shock of the tempest would treat the yacht, and finding that the noble craft was safe, they turned to watch their foes.

It was but a few moments ere they saw that, in spite of the fearful tempest, and the driving, reeling, plunging of the *Nemesis* as she drove madly on before the gale, that Montezuma was going to add man's fury in combat to mingle with the fury of the storm.

"Ready all! drive them into the sea and the yacht is our own," yelled the young Persian leader, and he sprang forward, cimeter in hand, to meet the attack of Montezuma.

Like two avalanches meeting the foes met, and hot and fierce became the combat, and wild yells, shots, clashing steel, groans and stern orders mingled with the war of the waves, the howling of the winds, and the thunder that burst from the inky clouds.

It was an awful scene, this fighting of men, in that fearful tempest, and the deck was lighted up continually by the flashing of fire-arms and ever and anon with a livid, blinding glare of lightning.

In the front, dealing death upon all sides, was Montezuma, and the Persians shrunk from before his mighty arm as from a tornado.

Step by step he cut his way forward, Mezrak at his side, and his crew at his back, and the Persians were pushed backward, cut down, and steadily driven.

In spite of their superior numbers they saw that Montezuma and the slave Mezrak were equal to a dozen men, and shot after shot was turned upon them, while many a blade that sought to catch their whirling cimeters went flying into the sea.

At last the men of the cruiser wavered, and a cry arose for quarter.

But with a fearful oath for Allah to curse all cowards, the Persian leader sprung to the front, and his blade met that of Montezuma.

It was but an instant the duel lasted, and then Montezuma cut him to the deck, while he shouted savagely, and with triumph in his tones:

"Thus die, dog Kaluta."

But the Persian leader arose on his elbow, and cried:

"I am not Prince Kaluta, but Ikloo, his younger brother."

Montezuma staggered back, for now he knew his mistake; but Ikloo was strangely like his elder brother, Prince Kaluta, and he had forgotten that he was an officer on board the cruiser.

Ikloo he had always liked, and seeing him dying now before him, he cried:

"Ikloo, my kinsman, I sought not your life, for you were obeying your orders."

"But Kaluta, a false kinsman, I believed you to be, or I would have spared you."

"I forgive you, Montezuma, for I know Kaluta was wrong."

"But it was my duty to obey, and my life is the forfeit."

"Kaluta is on the cruiser, and I warn you to fly, and never again set foot in Persia."

He tried to stretch forth his hand, yet had not the strength, and the next instant he dropped back dead.

Seeing their leader fall, the Persians had fled to the shelter of the forecastle, and the crew of the yacht had halted, so momentarily the battle had ceased.

But now all gazed upon Montezuma, as he arose from beside his dead kinsman, and saw him totter, reel, and fall forward.

But springing toward him, Mezrak caught him in his strong arms, while he shouted in stentorian tones:

"Hurl those dogs of burnt grandfathers into the sea!"

The crew of the yacht rushed upon the Persians, and again the fight commenced.

But only for a short time it lasted, and then not one of the men of the cruiser was upon the deck, the dead and wounded even being hurled overboard, and also the body of the brave young Lieutenant Ikloo, though a kinsman of their chief, not being respected by the revengeful crew of the *Nemesis*, whom the sight of their noble leader lying prone upon the deck drove to frenzy.

CHAPTER VI.

THE PLEDGE OF THE SLAVES.

AFTER their fearful outburst of revengeful passion the crew of the *Nemesis* stood like statues gazing in silence upon the prostrate form, over which bent the slave Mezrak.

The yacht still drove furiously on over the

furiously lashed waters, the storm still raged, the thunder roared and rattled, the wind howled through the rigging, and ever and anon the vivid flashes of the lightning illumined the mad waters.

For some moments it was believed that Montezuma was dead; but then a shudder shook his frame and his eyes opened.

"Allah be praised! You are not dead, mighty Sidi," cried Mezrak.

"No, but I am dying, my faithful Mezrak," was the low reply.

"Say not so, oh mighty master."

"It is true. Call Valik and bear me into the cabin; for I wish to gaze again upon her face, though death's seal be upon it, and upon my baby boy, my Merle Montezuma, for such shall be his name."

Valik, another huge slave, was called, and gently the two giant blacks bore Montezuma from the deck to the cabin.

Upon the starboard divan, looking as though she was asleep, lay Mildred, beautiful in death, yet as white as marble.

Near her sat Toolah, and in her arms she held the little infant, born amid the storm and the battle, and to become an orphan ere one day of life had passed over his tiny head.

The woman sprung to her feet with a wailing cry as she saw the giant blacks bearing Montezuma into the cabin, and she whispered:

"Dead?"

"No, good Toolah, but soon I will be, and I wished to die here," was the calm reply of the chief.

She laid the baby upon a lounge and motioned to the blacks to place Montezuma upon the port divan.

As soon as they had obeyed her she tore away his rich dress and hastily set to work to examine the wounds.

"Oh, master! you must die," she cried.

"Yes, Toolah."

"You have half a dozen wounds."

"Yes, but I bore up as long as I could."

The woman arose and motioned to the slaves, Mezrak and Valik, to move the divan upon which Montezuma lay alongside of that whereon was the form of the dead Mildred.

The chief smiled as they obeyed, and reaching over he took Mildred's cold hand within his own and said, quietly:

"I can die now."

"I have never feared death, and only cared to live for her sake."

"Ah, Sidi, would that you could live for the sake of your boy," and Toolah brought to him the infinitesimal bundle of humanity.

He took the roll of silk gently, gazed upon the tiny face for an instant, and then said, in a voice that was perfectly firm:

"Mezrak, Toolah, Valik, to your devoted care I leave my little Merle."

"You have served me well in the past, and I have done my duty by you; but now, with the shadow of death upon me, with the icy touch stilling my pulse, I command you not to desert that boy, my little son, Merle Montezuma, the true heir to the name and birthright of his grandmother, the Princess Zulah."

"Upon this vessel there is a treasure worthy of a prince, and all I intrust to your keeping, Mezrak, for you to hold for my boy."

"Valik, seek the island home upon the gulf shores of America, which you well know, and rear my boy up to know who were his parents, and that he has a sacred mission in life."

"My papers are his, and by them he will see what my life, and the life of his mother, have been, and the duty devolving upon him in future years."

"Upon that island, where my treasure was, and some of it yet remains, Valik, you, Mezrak and Toolah remain with my boy until he needs a tutor's care, and then take him to New Orleans, and seek Senor Andrea Angelos—you know him well, Valik?"

"Yes, mighty master."

"Bid him, from me, to educate my son, and place in his hands gold sufficient for all needs."

"When Merle reaches his eighteenth year,

give to him the fortune on Treasure Island, and Heaven grant that he use it well.

"You have heard me, slaves?"

"Yes, mighty Sidi."

"And will obey?"

"We will, mighty Sidi," again answered the three slaves in a breath.

"By Allah you swear it?"

"By Allah we swear it."

"May Allah curse you forever if you fail in your duty."

"May Allah's curse rest on us if we fail, mighty master."

"So be it."

"Now, Valik, Toolah and Mezrak, you are no longer slaves, and to your care I commit my boy."

With strange, guttural sounds of joy the two giant blacks and their female companion prostrated themselves before Montezuma, and long they remained thus in silence.

At last they arose, and Valik started, for he met the sightless eyes of his chief fixed upon him.

Upon his broad breast slumbered the little Merle, by his side was the form of Mildred, Death's seal upon her lips, and grand even though dead lay the form of the mighty Montezuma, whose life had been one long, strange romance.

CHAPTER VII.

A TRAITOR'S END.

I HAVE said that the crew of the *Nemesis* represented almost every known nation, and it was true.

In his life, in the United States Montezuma had gotten a crew for his vessel as circumstances offered, and there happened to be a couple of Americans, twice as many English, several Irish, a Scotchman, half a dozen Mexicans, two Portuguese, a few negroes who had been plantation slaves in Louisiana, and the number had been added to in Persia by sailors of that country, Turks, Greeks and a smattering of Moors and Algerines, captured on corsair vessels.

In the battle with the cruiser the Eastern men had suffered more, perhaps, because they fought the more desperately and risked greater dangers on account of their religion, so that the English-speaking seamen and Mexicans were in the majority when the sun arose the next morning and fell upon the *Nemesis* still drifting rapidly along over the rough waters.

Though the remnant of the crew had avenged the death of Montezuma most thoroughly, as soon as the excitement was over they began to look about as to what was to follow.

Montezuma was, when alive, sole chief, and had under him no officers other than a boatswain, who was a huge Englishman.

Valik and Mezrak were his slaves and his body-servants, and had held no command on the vessel, and yet in their charge Montezuma had left his son and his treasure.

As the sun arose, and Montezuma did not return to the deck, Brentford, the English boatswain, came to the cabin and asked:

"How is the chief?"

"The Sidi is dead," answered Valik.

"Dead! and the Lady Mildred?" cried Brentford, in surprise.

"The princess is dead also," replied Valik.

"Then I command the yacht!" cried the boatswain, in sudden triumph.

"The Sidi's son lives," responded Valik.

"His son?"

"Yes."

"Whose son?"

"The son of the mighty Sidi and the Princess Mildred."

"The devil! Was there a child born last night?" cried the astonished Englishman.

"Yes."

"And is alive?"

"Yes."

The boatswain stepped into the cabin and instantly removed his hat in respect for the dead.

He was a strange man, and had led a strange life.

He had been well-born, but turning to evil rather than good, had fled from home and had become a rover the world over.

But now, in the presence of the Montezuma and the beautiful Mildred, lying side by side in death, he stood with bowed, uncovered head, gazing upon them.

Just then Toolah came forward with the baby boy and held it before the eyes of the boatswain.

"Holy Neptune! but it's a beauty, what there is of it."

"A boy, you say?"

"Yes," said Toolah.

"Born in a storm and amid the thunder of guns."

"He'll be a warrior, certain."

"Poor boy! he is an orphan and friendless."

"No, for Mezrak, Valik and myself are its guardians and friends," said Toolah, firmly.

"Ah! a precious trio, truly."

"But who is the executor of the estate of Montezuma?"

"Toolah understands not the words of the *Soto Rais*."

"No. Well, who has charge of the treasure of the prince, to keep it for the boy?"

"Valik, Mezrak and Toolah."

"Ah! Well, as I was next in command to Montezuma, his death leaves me in charge, so I'll have something to say about this myself."

"It was the order of the dead Sidi," said Valik.

"Well, the Sidi is dead, and Captain Brentford is living, and he gives orders now."

"You take care of the baby, and I'll see honor paid the dead, and look after the treasure for the youth."

"As the Montezuma was heading for American shores, I will hold the same course until it is decided what is best to be done."

Brentford then went on deck and met face to face a Spaniard, who had evidently heard what had passed in the cabin, for he said in a cunning way:

"The chief is dead, his wife is dead, and we can throw the child overboard and share the treasure."

For an instant Brentford seemed about to spring upon him; but, suddenly changing his mind, he said:

"Yes, they are dead."

"Come in and see how like sleep their death seems."

The Spaniard followed him into the cabin, and, pointing to the dead, Brentford closed the companion-way, while he said to Valik:

"Slave, that traitor plotted the death of the child and the seizing of the treasure."

"I leave him to you."

Brentford knew but too well that "leaving him to Valik" meant death, for, ere the Spaniard could utter a cry, the knife of the huge negro was in his heart.

"Now, Valik, I can see that it is best that none should know that the chief and his lady are dead, for mutiny would follow to get possession of the treasure, as the words of this wretch well prove."

"I will therefore say the chief was wounded, and until some plan can be agreed upon to get rid of the traitors, no one shall know better."

"To-night throw the bodies of your master and mistress into the sea, and also this wretch, and remain quiet about the affair."

"Do you all understand?"

They bowed assent, and Brentford left the cabin once more.

The sea was still rough and a stiff breeze was forcing the yacht swiftly along over the rough waters.

The bulwarks were shattered in many places, the rigging was cut and the spars splintered, and the new commander of the *Nemesis* determined to at once set the crew to work repairing damages.

Calling them aft, he told them that Montezuma was severely wounded, but, under the kind nursing of the Princess Mildred, would

ere long recover; but, for the present, he was ordered to command the *Nemesis*, and he expected implicit obedience to his every order.

He looked over his crew and saw that he had a score of able-bodied men, and he muttered:

"Just enough to make mischief if they knew the chief was dead, and know it they shall not until I get ready to act."

All day long the crew worked at the repairs, and by night had the yacht once more in trim.

After the tired men had turned in, leaving Brentford and the few needed only on duty, Valik came quietly from the cabin, bearing in his arms the form of poor Mildred, neatly wrapped in a piece of canvas.

Watching his opportunity he let the body drop into the sea, and as it sunk rapidly into the dark depths the yacht sailed on and no one forward saw the act.

Returning to the cabin soon after, Mezrak appeared, also bearing a canvas-wrapped form—the body of Montezuma.

And it, too, was dropped into the sea, and, glancing backward, Brentford saw the white canvas glimmering in the moonlight, and muttered:

"So ends the mighty Montezuma, the Merciless, and into his royal shoes shall step Brentford the Adventurer, for henceforth I guide the destiny of this craft and revel in the treasures she bears beneath her decks."

"At last, Brandt Brentford, the star of thy destiny rises out of an ocean of gloom."

CHAPTER VIII.

TWO PLOTTERS AND THEIR PLOT.

ALTHOUGH Brentford believed the secret of Montezuma and Mildred being dead sacredly kept, it was not the case, for the truth had half-way leaked out.

The yacht's self-appointed captain had each day made known to the crew that the chief was slowly improving, and would be again on deck by the time the vessel reached the Gulf of Mexico, whither it was bound, though with no direct destination in the mind of Brentford.

The princess, he said, was also ill, and a baby had been born to the Sidi and his wife, he told the crew, and as this was the only truth he did tell, he gave proof of it, by having Toolah bring the baby boy on deck for general inspection.

The youngster was greatly admired, said to be the exact image of his father and mother both, and then returned to the seclusion of the cabin by his faithful nurse.

But, for all this proof, the crew began to suspect, and their suspicions were based upon the fact that one of their number had gone down to the cabin, in search of Brentford, when a sail came in sight, and found that worthy eating his supper at the table that was sacred to Montezuma and his wife.

Standing in the shadow the seaman looked within, and saw Mezrak waiting upon the new captain, while Toolah was seated upon a divan with the baby on her knee, and Mezrak lay at full length upon the floor.

Remembering the almost idolatrous respect paid by the slaves to Montezuma and Mildred, the seaman thought it strange that there should now rest upon them an air of disrespect, while Brentford the boatswain should be eating in the cabin and drinking the costly wines of the chief.

There was no look of a sick-room about the cabin, and it seemed strange that both Montezuma and Mildred should be lying ill in the small state-rooms, and not out where they could get pure air and every attention.

The beholder of these suspicious signs said nothing then, but called to Brentford, told him of the sail in sight, and went forward to his duties.

For a day or two he carefully watched all that transpired aft, and was the more convinced that both the chief and Mildred were dead.

At last he made known his suspicions to his most intimate shipmate, who at once said:

"I tell you I believe you are right, for I

now remember, the night after the battle, when I was on watch, seeing one of those big niggers come out of the cabin with a large bundle and throw it overboard."

"I then thought it might be clothing stained with the blood of the chief, for I knew he had been wounded near a dozen times; but now, I guess 'twas the chief or the lady, one or t'other that was dropped into the sea."

"But why did not Brentford tell us?" asked the first man, and it was evident that the two Englishmen, for such they were, felt hurt toward their countryman.

"Do you know what's in this craft, shipmate?" asked the other.

"Yes, the chief's treasure."

"There you have it, and I'm blest if I don't think that Brentford is playing a deep game to get his clutches upon it."

"I know you are right; but I guess we'll get a share too."

"So I'm thinking, for there's enough for all."

"There's millions, I've heard, on board."

"Yes, and it will make us all rich."

"If the chief was alive I'd stick to him, or to his lady if she was living; but it's asking too much to go poor all the rest of our days for a baby as don't know the good of anything, and I, for one, won't do it."

"We'll have a fair divide, and then each man go his way."

"We'll give the niggers something, so, if they want to, they can have enough to take care of the little one."

"Yes, and I guess they'll want to, for they loved the chief and the lady."

"May be they'll fight for it."

"Let 'em."

"They're a bad lot to tackle."

"What can they do with us all?"

"Perhaps all will not join us."

"Well, we'll see."

"I'll take half of the crew, and you t'other half, and we'll tell 'em what we suspect, and see how they are on the divvy of the treasure."

Thus it was decided, and that night the two friends and plotters set to work to carry out their plan to seize the treasure of Montezuma.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MUTINY.

THE whispered suspicions of the two plotters soon went the rounds of the crew, and instantly there was a general feeling of ill will felt toward Brentford and the slaves in the cabin for keeping from them the knowledge of their chief's death.

They saw the affair in the light the two Englishmen wished, that is, they beheld their own advantage in the death of the Montezuma and Mildred.

The treasure would have to be divided, and the plot was to give Brentford, Mezrak and Valik nothing, and in fact, punish them with death for their treachery toward them, and to allow Toolah so much on condition she would take oath to care for the little Merle during his life, or until he grew to man's estate.

By this act of kindness toward Toolah and the baby boy, they atoned to their consciences for stealing the treasure of the little heir, they thought.

All this time Brentford remained in the belief that his stories of Montezuma's improved condition were believed, and having sighted land, which he knew to be the Bermudas, he came to the conclusion to at once form some definite plan of action.

Had he his own way he would have taken the most precious jewels of the treasure for himself and decamped upon arriving in some port; but this he knew the slaves would not allow.

If he sided with the crew he would make it a case of "long division," as the treasure would have to be divided between many.

His best chance then was to side with the blacks, get rid of the crew, and then see what was to be done.

"We can run to some lonely island in the Gulf, send the best number ashore in a boat after water, and then sail and leave them there, for the few we retain on board we can manage."

"Then we can drop anchor in some port, divide the spoils and go our own way, leaving the yacht ownerless," said Brentford, as he sat one evening in the cabin, the very day after the vessel had entered the waters of what was then called the Gulf of Florida, and had Orange Key dead astern of her.

"The Rais talks as though the treasure was his own to divide," said Toolah, looking up from the face of the baby boy she held in her lap.

"Mine! oh no, but I certainly expect a share of it."

"No, the treasure belongs to the son of the Sidi and him only, and he alone shall have it," answered the woman.

"Hah! you speak boldly, for I am the one who has the say here," was Brentford's hot response.

"No, the Sidi gave his orders to his slaves, and they swore by Allah's name to do his bidding, and neither Mezrak, Valik or Toolah will break their oaths," said Valik firmly.

"Well, I intended the boy to have his share, and you too, but as you seem to wish it all for yourselves, and count me out, I will leave it to the crew and they will decide that the treasure is to be divided."

Just as Valik was about to make reply Mezrak came quickly into the cabin and said earnestly:

"Come, arm yourselves, for the crew know all, and are coming to take the vessel and the treasure from us."

This came like a thunderbolt upon Brentford, and knowing that the crew would use him severely for keeping the secret from them, he saw his only safety was in siding with the two slaves, whose great strength and prowess he well knew, and considered them in fact, a match for the men in open fight.

"Come, lads, we must defend the treasure the chief left his child, and I will then run the yacht to a place of safety."

Both Valik and Toolah now mistrusted Brentford, but he was the one for them to side with, they knew, and he alone could carry the yacht into a port, so, after a word with Mezrak, in their native tongue, they decided to seek his aid in earnest in defending the treasure.

"The Rais will find us true to the pledge we gave the Sidi, and those dogs must die if they come to take away the treasure," said Valik, and he seized his huge cimeter and placed in his belt several long-barrel pistols, while Mezrak did the same, and after conveying little Merle to an inner state-room, Toolah also came forward well armed, and well did she know the use of weapons.

In the mean time the mutineers had decided upon their plan, which was to come aft, seize the Rais and two slaves, and then take the treasure and divide it, after which the yacht was to be run ashore and every man escape into the interior with his booty.

If the Rais and slaves resisted they were to be killed.

But there were two of the crew who, though siding with their comrades, were not in the plot at heart, but only to save their lives.

These were two American negroes, who too greatly feared the Fetish of the Abyssinians to dare side against them, and determined, if opportunity offered, to go with them against their shipmates before the mast.

As Brentford heard the steps of the mutineers approaching, he looked out of the companionway and asked sternly:

"What means this, men?"

One of his own countrymen, the one who had first discovered the secret that was kept from them, stepped forward and answered:

"It means, Boatswain Brentford, that you have not treated us square, but have lied to us."

"Back to the fore-castle, dog of a mutineer,

or it will be the worse for you," said Brentford, sternly.

But not a man moved; and the ring-leader resumed:

"No, we'll remain here, and it will be the worse for you, bo'sen."

"If the chief had lived we'd have served him faithful to the end—ay, and his sweet lady, too."

"But they is dead, and the babby is too young to know a friend from a foe, and we've sworn you shall not have the treasure this craft holds for yourself and them three niggers."

"So just keep quiet, and we'll give you all your lives; but if you resist you'll die right here."

There was no mistaking these words, and Brentford did not seem to care to.

He had desperate men to deal with, he knew, and he was determined to take desperate measures with them.

As he had stood there Mezrak had whispered to him that Valik had been called forward, between decks, by some one of the crew, and this gave him hope.

Now Valik had returned and whispered:

"The two black Americans are our friends, so you, Mezrak and Toolah attack in front, and I will go through and attack in their rear with our allies."

This gave Brentford hope that the battle would be won by the few, and determined to gain another advantage by quick and decisive work, he said:

"You are then determined to take this treasure, Brail?"

"Yes, me and my shipmates."

"It does not belong to you."

"Nor to you, bo'sen."

"You will be committing piracy upon the high seas."

"Well, I guess it's no more than most of us has done afore, and they do say you was a pirate afore you joined the yacht," was the bold reply.

To this bold assertion Brentford made no verbal reply; but he responded by suddenly raising a pistol over the companionway hatch and firing.

A shriek burst from the lips of the mutineer, and he fell dead upon the deck before his horrified companions, wholly taken by surprise, knew what had happened.

CHAPTER X.

THE FIGHT FOR THE TREASURE.

THE NEMESIS, when the mutineers marched aft, was barely moving along, for a breeze was fanning the waters hardly sufficient to wave the white field of the flag of Persia so that the lion in its center could be seen.

One man was at the helm, and he was also a mutineer.

At the fall of the leader the helmsman left his post and sprung to the side of his shipmates.

It was the one who had been the friend of the dead man, and was his countryman, and he now took the lead by shouting:

"Now, men, that traitor has sealed his fate."

"Cut him down!"

All that the mutineers needed then was a leader, and with wild cries they rushed toward the companionway.

But suddenly before them sprung Brentford, a cimeter in one hand, a cutlass in the other, and by his side was Valik, and behind these two Toolah came, a pistol in either hand.

The mutineers were armed only with cutlasses, and there were four shots from the defenders of the treasure as they got near enough to cross blades, and, though Toolah had fired two of them, they were all fatal.

But, maddened by the loss of their comrades, the mutineers rushed on, and their cutlasses met the blades of Brentford and Valik just as three shots were heard in their rear, and as more of their number fell Mezrak and the two American negroes attacked them.

This was a terrible surprise to the mutineers, for seven of their number were dead, and now they had to oppose a force only half their own, and all knew what Mezrak and Valik were in battle, and had no indifferent opinion of Brentford, while besides there were the two negroes of the crew whom they had relied upon, and Toolah, who, though a woman, they had looked upon as a witch, or at least akin to the Devil.

Taking advantage of the surprise of the mutineers, Brentford pressed the fighting, and almost in a minute's time they were beaten back and flew toward the fore-castle, crying for quarter, having only succeeded in slightly wounding Brentford and one of the American negroes.

But Valik and Mezrak, when their blood was up, were in no humor to give quarter, and with Toolah at their back, screaming wildly and performing a kind of Fetish battle-dance as she ran, they followed up the mutineers and cut them down.

Brentford called to them to spare several of the crew to aid in working the yacht, but they did not heed him, and their blows fell thick and fast upon the heads of the mutineers, until those who remained in abject terror ran and sprung into the sea to escape the black giants, preferring to die by drowning rather than to meet death at their savage hands.

When the last one of the mutineers had been disposed of, either by death or being driven to jump into the sea, where death, too, must follow them, the three huge Abyssinians came slowly aft, their cimeters dripping with human blood, for Toolah had also wielded death-blows around her.

As they approached him, Brentford shuddered, for he realized how little they would regard his life did he give them cause to take it.

But he was no man to tamely yield a point, and having made up his mind to possess the treasure, he did not intend to give it up without a desperate attempt to gain it.

The American negroes were more than ever impressed with the strange blacks, and stood grinning at the service they had rendered them by making the plot of the mutineers known, and hoping sincerely that that their good act would save them from all fear of the Devil forever more.

"Well, Valik, you and your companions have certainly punished those fellows most severely, though you have left us short-handed to work the yacht," said Brentford.

"We have not very far to go, and we are enough to man her if we keep her under shortened sail, for there are four of us besides yourself," said Valik.

"Well, we will manage to get along; but now what is to be done?"

"Run to the island the mighty Sidi was wrecked upon when he was a mere baby like his own child here."

"It is an island seldom visited, and for long years held the treasure of the Sidi, and can do so again until his son is old enough to claim it as his own."

"And where is this island, Valik?" asked Brentford, with an eagerness he could not keep back.

"On the Mexican coast."

"If you will head for Vera Cruz, from there I will get my bearings, and find it," was the cautious reply of the black, who did not allow to pass unnoticed the manner of Brentford.

Valik and Mezrak were both good sailors, yet they were not navigators, and depended upon Brentford to find the Mexican coast for them, after which the former felt his ability to discover the island he sought, if the weather was pleasant.

If not, he would wait until it was, for he was determined not to trust Brentford with the secret of its exact locality, for he feared the man might return there with a force it would be useless to resist.

Knowing that the blacks suspected him, and himself suspicious of them, Brandt Brentford could but do one thing, and that was to head the yacht for Vera Cruz.

"I'll not be thwarted by these black devils," he muttered; "for, let me know the neighborhood of that island, and the treasure is mine."

CHAPTER XI.

ADrift AT SEA.

AFTER several days, in which the small crew of the *Nemesis* was kept hard at work, and with Brentford constantly on deck, for the weather grew rough after entering the gulf, the yacht came in sight of the Mexican coast.

Shortly after the turrets of the celebrated fortress, known as the Castle San Juan d' Uloa, came in full view, with the city of Vera Cruz, the "Iron Gate of Mexico," behind it.

Brandt Brentford stood at the helm of the yacht, and the vessel was bowling merrily along.

Valik and Mezrak stood apart, talking earnestly together, while Toolah was in the cabin looking after the wants of little Merle.

Forward, leaning indolently over the bulwarks, and gazing upon the distant land, were the two American negroes.

Presently Valik came aft and Brentford said in an off-hand way:

"Well, Valik, yonder rises Vera Cruz, so which way shall I head now to reach that mysterious island?"

"Come into the cabin, Rais, and look at the map," said Valik, with more respect in his tone than he had lately shown to the yacht's commander.

"But I cannot leave the helm, Valik."

"Mezrak will relieve you, Rais."

Mezrak came aft at a call from his comrade and quietly took the helm, and Valik descended into the cabin, followed by Brentford.

Taking up a map and unrolling it, Valik said:

"See here, Rais."

Brandt Brentford bent over the map, when he was suddenly seized in a vise-like grasp which even his great strength was powerless to shake off.

"Rais, I will not harm you, so do not resist."

"Those irons, Toolah," said Valik, calmly.

Instantly the woman handed him irons for the wrists and ankles, and clasp them upon the prisoner, he left the cabin and ascended to the deck, leaving him dazed with astonishment.

After a word to Mezrak he returned to the cabin, and a moment after one of the American negroes entered, and at once found himself in the iron grip of Valik.

"Oh Lordy! yer hain't gwine ter kill me, is yer Massa Fetish?" cried the frightened negro, feeling sure he was going to be sacrificed to the Devil.

"No, nor harm you; but I put you in irons to prevent you doing any mischief."

Placing the irons upon him, Valik again left the cabin and called to the remaining negro.

He approached with the fear he always felt of the two black giants.

"Sambo, help me and I will not harm you."

"Yas, massa, fore de Lord I do all you tell me an' more too," said Sambo, who now missed his companion and the boatswain.

"Well, help me to lower away this boat."

It was soon done, and was towing alongside, when Valik called to Mezrak to go about, and he and Sambo sprang to the sheet halyards.

"Now, Sambo, for fear of accidents, put a cask of water and some provisions in the boat."

The negro quickly obeyed.

"That is well."

"Now, as it is sunset we part company."

"Yer goin' ter drown me, massa?" cried Sambo in terror.

"No, but let you go to yonder city."

So saying Valik entered the cabin and soon returned with Brandt Brentford and the other negro, who answered to the name of Coal.

Both were blindfolded, and the irons were still upon them.

With the ease that a man of ordinary strength would have handled a child, Valik took Brentford up and lowered him into the boat, and a moment after did the same for Coal.

"Now, Sambo, look here."

The negro tremblingly obeyed and his eyes were at once securely bandaged.

"Sambo, over you and Coal I have the Fetish power, and I will use it against you, if you disobey me in the slightest thing."

"Bress yer, I is goin' ter do as yer tells me."

"I is too," they both cried in alarm.

"Well, I put you in this boat, and you, Sambo, I leave free to use your hands, though I blindfold you."

"I sees yer does," answered Sambo, though without intending a joke.

"There, the sunset gun from the fort has just been fired, and I command you, in the name of Fetish, not to remove the blindfold from your eyes until you hear the tolling of the cathedral bell at midnight, for you are but two leagues away and the sound will easily reach you here."

"If either of you slaves disobey, beware of the Fetish power forevermore."

The two negroes shuddered, and Valik continued:

"Here is the key, Sambo, that unlocks the irons on the Rais and Coal, and at midnight you can let them free, take your oars and row to the city, but not before, if you dread my curse."

Then addressing Brentford Valik continued:

"Rais, the purse I placed in your pocket is well filled, and you will find it ample for ordinary wants, though of course you will be in a rage that you miss the treasure you had determined to rob the Sidi's son of."

"To these negroes I give also a purse each, so they will not suffer."

"Farewell."

He placed a purse heavy with gold in the hand of Sambo, and dropped him into the boat.

Then he cast loose the painter, and called out:

"Remember, you black sons of a burnt grandfather, do not touch an oar, or leave this spot until the cathedral bell tolls midnight."

"I hain't gwine ter," called back Sambo, while Brandt Brentford uttered a deep curse.

Stepping aft, Valik then joined Mezrak at the helm, and instantly the yacht's course was changed, and she headed for the Treasure Island, leaving the boat and its three blindfolded occupants drifting upon the waters, and Brandt Brentford in vain entreating Sambo, whose arms were free, to rid them of the chains, or to at least take off the bandage from his eyes that he might see in which direction the yacht headed.

"No, cap'n, der Fetish ruin dis nigger ef he do, an' I isn't gwine ter; is I, Coal?"

"No; fer yer knows better den make der Fetish mad," answered Coal, and against their superstitious fears Brentford fumed in vain, while the *Nemesis* sailed merrily away in the gathering gloom, bound for the secret island.

"Oh, curse those black devils," yelled Brentford, "for they used me to bring them to land, and then leave me here."

"But they shall not escape, and that treasure I will yet find."

"Ho, you black rascal, if you do not release me of these irons, that I may see which way the yacht heads, I'll kill you when I get free."

"I'll not free you then, massa, but drop you over in der water ter sink," said Sambo, sullenly, and feeling how thoroughly in the man's power he was, Brentford changed his manner and began to offer bribes.

"No; gold hain't gwine ter do me no good if de Fetish cuss me," was the answer.

And Sambo remained firm in his resolve, until a last the sound of the tolling bell floated off over the waters.

Then he removed the bandage from his eyes, and five minutes after he had freed Brentford and Coal of their irons and blindfolds.

Away in the distance were visible the lights of Vera Cruz, but nowhere could be seen upon the waters the white sails of the *Nemesis*.

"Get to work at the oars and pull for the town," said Brentford, savagely, and the

negroes quickly obeyed, for they saw that the heavens were becoming overcast with dark clouds, and the wind was rising, and well knew that was no boat in which to be overtaken by a storm.

CHAPTER XII.

THE STORM.

It certainly was a most daring undertaking, on the part of the former slaves of Montezuma, to attempt alone to find the Treasure Island in the yacht.

In his infancy Montezuma had been wrecked on that island, and there his mother, the Princess Zulah, had found a grave.

There also the treasure of the princess and Freelance, the Buccaneer, had been hidden, and for many long years the faithful Valik had remained there and guarded it.

The Abyssinian slave had seen his master, Freelance, depart with his little son, Merle, for Mexico, and though years upon years passed, he remained true and waited that master's return.

But instead of Freelance, there came back the one who had been born there, the baby boy grown to manhood, and who became the mighty Montezuma the Merciless.

Having been true to Freelance, then to his son Montezuma, Valik would still remain true to the little Merle, and to keep his treasure from others he had boldly determined to risk death to all by running the yacht there alone, aided by only those he knew well he could trust, Mezrak and Toolah.

Wholly ignorant of finding land when once out of sight of it, Valik yet knew, if he could reach Vera Cruz, he could run to the Treasure Island if he did not lose sight of the shore by being driven off by a storm.

When he set Brentford adrift in his boat, with the two negroes, the night came on clear and starlight.

But hardly had the boat been lost sight of upon the waters than the wind grew stronger and clouds began to skurry swiftly across the skies.

He knew well how to handle the yacht, and Mezrak was also a good sailor, while Toolah was most willing to aid.

Luffing up, he set just what sail was needed, and again continued on his course to the island.

But the storm came on about midnight, and poor Valik felt that he had indeed shouldered a fearful responsibility.

The dark line of shore had been visible before the storm broke, and within sight of this he was most anxious to keep, so he lay the vessel to and waited.

For hours the storm raged, and then at last the dawn came, and eagerly the three slaves gazed landward.

To their horror they beheld it only a few cables' length away, for the yacht had drifted badly.

Quickly she was gotten under way again, and stood off to a safe distance, and then standing off and on the day passed.

It was a long, fearful day, with the severest work devolving upon the little crew, and then night again set in, and with the darkness the storm increased.

Valik and Mezrak, in spite of their superb courage, were disheartened.

Yet they still worked manfully, and though it is a true sailor's duty to shun a lee shore in a blow, they were determined not to lose sight of it.

Not daring to lay to, they let the yacht drive on along the coast and within hearing distance of the breakers.

"Valik, I fear we did wrong in letting the Rais and the two men leave."

"We should have made them run us to the island."

"And have them know its bearings, Toolah?" asked Valik, for she it was that had spoken.

"What did it matter if they did?" said the woman.

"They could have gotten away in a boat,

returned, and our oath to the Sidi would never have been kept."

"They need not have gone."

"But they would have done so."

"Is the island not large enough for three graves?"

Both Valik and Mezrak understood the significant question, and each one felt that they had been wrong in releasing Brentford and the negroes, and that a knife would have silenced their tongues forever.

All this time the yacht was driving furiously on, guided from the sound of the breakers on the shore, for when they became more distinctly heard, Valik would luff a point or two, and thus guide his course by their roar.

Suddenly right ahead was heard a terrific roar, and quickly Valik luffed.

But the sound still continued ahead, and grew louder and fiercer.

Quickly then he let her fall off, and yet the sound was dead ahead.

"Allah save us! We have run into a nest of reefs," cried Valik, and he called to Mezrak and Toolah to aid him in putting the yacht about.

But they were too late, for suddenly, as the sharp bows began to wear round, there came tearing along a mighty wave, and raising the vessel upon its crested bosom, it hurled her with terrific force upon a ragged reef.

The shock was fearful and threw the three Abyssinians to the deck, while the masts snapped short off, and the lateen yards and rigging came down with a terrific crash, just as a tremendous wave boarded over the stern, and a wild cry of terror told that some one had been dragged away to die upon the mad waters.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TREASURE ISLAND.

BREATHLESSLY awaited those on the wrecked yacht for the coming of the dawn.

The storm fortunately was subsiding, when the vessel was hurled upon the reef, and each succeeding wave was of lesser fury and strength, so that the stout hull was not beaten to pieces as was feared, and though hit hard, was able to withstand the rude blows.

Within the cabin crouched Toolah, the little Merle clasped in her arms.

Upon the deck, clinging to the shattered wheel was Mezrak, gazing over the wild waste of waters to the land beyond.

And that land was an island, hardly twenty acres in size, wild and barren looking, with rocky shores, and a few trees near the center.

"Toolah!"

In answer to the call the woman came on deck, still bearing little Merle in her arms.

"Well, Mezrak?"

"You have heard poor Valik describe the Treasure Island?"

"Yes."

"Does not that look like it?"

She started and gazed earnestly upon the island, the wreck lying upon a reef half a mile distant, and deep, still water being between.

"Yes, it certainly looks like the painting the Sidi made of the island," she said.

"How strange that the storm should have driven us upon it, and then have taken poor Valik from us."

"Yes. Allah's ways are strange," returned the woman.

"I will swim ashore and look around me."

He threw aside his outer garments and sprung into the sea, from the bows of the *Nemesis*, with the same confidence a Sandwich Islander would have done.

His strong strokes carried him rapidly shoreward, the woman watching his progress.

He landed upon a rocky point and went up into the interior.

There was a natural wall of rock, and within a few acres of fertile land, with groups of trees, a rivulet or two, and beyond, against a pile of rocks a small cabin, built of ship timber.

In passing through one of the groves of trees he halted, for a grave was before him.

A rock was at the head of the lone grave, serving as a headstone, and into its smooth surface was rudely cut:

"ZULAH,

"A PRINCESS OF PERSIA."

This was all, and it told to Mezrak that he was on the Treasure Island.

Going on further he came to the pile of rocks, and beheld the entrance to the cavern, which had so long been the receptacle of the treasure which the faithful Valik had guarded so zealously.

"Yes, it is the Treasure Island, and once more it will become so, but I, not poor Valik, will be the guardian."

"I will return for Toolah, and here is to be our home, and as our boats were lost, I will make a raft and remove the treasure to the cave."

So saying, Mezrak returned to the shore, plunged into the water and swam hastily back to the schooner to tell Toolah of the discovery he had made.

To his surprise, she did not meet him on deck, and hastily he descended into the cabin.

Instantly he started back with a cry of surprise and horror coming from his lips.

There, upon the cabin floor, lay Toolah, and she was dead.

But, still in her arms she clasped the infant Merle, who was alive, and whose wide open eyes were staring at Mezrak as he gazed upon him.

Across the cabin lay two men, one dead, the other dying.

At a glance Mezrak recognized them as two of the crew they had believed to be killed in the mutiny.

He saw now that they had concealed themselves on the vessel, and there remained until the vessel struck.

Coming out of the hold, they had evidently met Toolah, and either attacked her or been attacked by her, and the result was before Mezrak.

The dying man tried to speak, yet could not, and soon gasped his last, while Mezrak gazed un pityingly down upon him, and held in his hand his knife to hasten the end, was there a hope of his reviving.

It was a strange, sad picture, that huge black slave gazing down upon the scene before him, and his heart was moved to its depths as he looked upon the baby boy and said:

"All are gone, little Sidi, but Mezrak, but he will be true to his oath to your father."

CHAPTER XIV.

MEZRAK AND MERLE.

A DOZEN years have passed away since that night of storm when the good yacht *Nemesis* was driven upon the very island her black commander had been in search of.

In that time, twelve years, changes have come to the two inmates of that lone Treasure Island, the greatest of which one who, on that awful night of wreck, was a baby, had grown to be a handsome, splendidly-formed boy, with the combined beauty of his lovely mother and magnificent bearing and daring face of his father.

Left alone the protector of the baby boy, Mezrak did not get disheartened, but at once accepted the situation with all the gentleness of a nurse.

His first care was for the infant, and he tried to take it from the death embrace in which it was clasped by Toolah to her heart.

But he had to sever the stiffened sinews, so rigid had they become in her desperate, dying hold upon the infant.

Then he went down into the hold and brought up the goat, whose milk had been so useful to the little one, and fed him well, after which he laid it down to sleep, while he worked.

Mending the only remaining boat, as best he could, he first carried the live freight of the yacht ashore, and which consisted of goats, fowls and birds of rare plumage, with several dogs, the faithful, dumb friends of Montezuma.

These were turned loose upon the island, and then a boat-load of stores followed, with clothing for the comfort of the baby, which Mezrak carried with him.

The hut was repaired, and furnished with the furniture of the yacht's cabin, and after the baby had again sunk to sleep after a hearty meal, Mezrak buried the bodies of poor Toolah and Valik, the latter having been washed ashore, torn and bleeding.

The bodies of the two mutineers were coolly thrown into the sea.

And thus did the faithful Mezrak work day after day, week after week, and month after month, until the last piece of timber, even, of the yacht, had been towed ashore and piled away for future use if needed.

The yacht had been most thoroughly provisioned and stored for a year's cruise, and every thing had been carefully preserved by the untiring and provident Mezrak, who had planted seed in the one fertile spot of the island, and was delighted at reaping the harvest, and find his live-stock increasing, his birds multiplying rapidly, and best of all his pet growing into a splendid child.

Though an Abyssinian slave Mezrak had been well educated during his service of Montezuma, and he was determined that little Merle should learn all that he could teach him, and, as the years glided by he was delighted to see that the boy could read the books brought from the yacht, and also speak Persian, Abyssinian and English language with which Mezrak's knowledge as a linguist ended.

One afternoon, just twelve years after the night of wreck, Mezrak was seated upon a rock looking over the blue waters of the gulf, while Merle, a few paces distant, was practicing at a target with a pair of dueling pistols that had been his father's.

The boy was well formed, tall for his age, and as graceful in every movement as a fawn.

His face was bronzed, but through the clear complexion was visible the flush of perfect health.

His face was resolute, perfect in every feature, and he had the large, liquid-diamond eyes of his father, haunted by the same look of sadness that had ever brooded in Montezuma's look, and the same smile, utterly unfathomable and yet strangely fascinating which had been the charm of his remarkable parent.

His hands and feet were very small and shapely, and he had on a pair of Persian sandals that had evidently belonged to his mother.

His suit was a silk shirt, cut sailor fashion, a pair of pants razed down from a man's size, by the faithful Mezrak, a silk turban, and a sash.

At every shot he made he sent a bullet in the bull's-eye, and seeming tired of being so sure in his aim, he put his pistols in his sash and walked over to the rock and sat down by Mezrak.

"Well Mezrak, what are you thinking about?" he asked with a smile.

"Mezrak was thinking of his master," was the quiet reply, for he always so addressed Merle.

"Of me?"

"Yes, master."

"What about me, Mezrak?"

"You are twelve years old."

"Yes, I have lived here, according to the way the books count, as you have taught me, twelve years, which are one hundred and forty-four months, or six hundred and twenty-four weeks, or four thousand three hundred and eighty days, and, as I was two months and four days old when I came here, I am now four thousand four hundred and forty-four days old, which you, for short, call twelve years."

"Well, the master knows better than Mezrak to figure, as he has learned all that was in the books."

"Yes, I know what I have read, and I know what you have taught me, Mezrak, and I love to think of my father and mother, and I would

love to see the great world the books tell about and which you have seen.

"It is hard for me to believe that there is land beyond that water. I see all around me; and yet I have seen ships go by often, and they must be going somewhere and coming from somewhere.

"I love this island, Mezrak, but I would like to see what else the world has in it."

"And you shall, master, for our sloop will soon be built.

"Come, let us go down and work on it now."

The black led the way, and in a cove, penetrating into the rocks and forming a basin some sixty feet long by twenty wide, was a small craft with a single mast.

For years that craft had been building, and the perseverance and skill displayed in its construction was marvelous.

It was about thirty feet long by twelve in beam, had a single mast and bow-sprit, and a small cabin aft.

It had been roughly but strongly built of the yacht's timbers, the keel having been laid on the sand, which, after the hull was complete, had been dug away around it, allowing the water to run in and float it.

Both Mezrak and Merle had worked at it for six years, and, with blocks and ropes, the mast had been stepped only a week before the evening the two skilled builders are presented to the reader, the one seated meditatively upon the rock gazing seaward, and the other practicing with the dueling pistols of his father, Montezuma.

As they reached the little vessel Mezrak said:

"We will go to work on the sails now, master, and finish them up, and then we will paint her and all will be ready."

"And I am to be captain and you the crew, Mezrak?" said the boy.

"Yes, master, for you already handle the yawl well, and it will take little time for you to learn to manage the sloop."

"Ships have names, Mezrak?"

"Yes, master."

"Then our ship must have a name."

"Yes, master."

"What shall it be?"

"I leave that to you, master."

"My name is Merle Montezuma?"

"Yes, little Sidi."

"And my father's was Montezuma?"

"Yes."

"It would look like what the books call vanity, Mezrak, to name it after me."

"As you please, master."

"My mother was the Princess Mildred?"

"Yes, master."

"Are boats female, Mezrak?"

"They can have feminine names."

"So they can; I remember now."

"My mother was very beautiful, as her miniature you gave me shows, and this boat is what the books call ugly, so I won't name it Lady Mildred.

"Are you ugly, Mezrak?"

"Yes, master," was the frank and truthful avowal.

"Then as you and the boat are alike, I'll call it Mezrak, and it will protect me and serve me, and you do the same, so that will be its name."

"Thank you, master."

"If it is half as good as you are, Mezrak, it will be a splendid boat.

"But where are we to go in it?"

"First we will learn to manage it thoroughly, master, and then we will go to Vera Cruz, where you can go to the Padre's college to learn more than I can teach you."

"Will you go to school with me, Mezrak?"

"No, master."

"You don't know anything?"

"No."

"Don't you want to learn?"

"No, master; I only want you to learn, that one of these days you will be a great man."

And thus the reader has been introduced to my boy hero, as he was slowly making his way from boyhood to youth, unmindful of the

career before him, and which Destiny had already carved out for him to follow.

A week more and the Mezrak, sloop—Merle Montezuma, captain—was completed, and from that day the boy became a most skillful and daring sailor, and gloried in running the rocky gantlet in and out of the island in the darkest and stormiest nights, and which caused Mezrak to pronounce him a true son of his father.

CHAPTER XV.

A STRANGE VISITOR.

Two more years have passed away, and we find Merle a youth of fourteen, straight as an arrow, and grown more handsome in every feature.

For two terms he has been at the Padre's college in Vera Cruz, where he was entered by the faithful Mezrak, who simply said he was the son of a wealthy ranchero up the coast.

The two had run down to Vera Cruz in the Mezrak, which Merle had indeed discovered to be a most homely, though seaworthy craft, when compared with the numerous trim vessels seen at anchor in front of the city.

Merle had been taken up to the college and entered as a student under the name of Merle Monte, and as a bag of gold had been placed in the hands of the worthy padres, no questions were naturally asked, though the youth had been instructed by the black as to what falsehoods he was to tell.

Leaving Merle to gain knowledge, Mezrak, the faithful guardian of the treasure, had returned to the island, and there remained alone until the end of the first term, when he sought Vera Cruz to carry the youth back with him for a few months.

Merle was most delighted at the prospect, for in spite of his better knowledge of the world, he dearly loved the lone island; but he persuaded Mezrak to invest in a trim little craft of schooner rig that was offered for sale.

This Mezrak did, and the sloop in tow, for the black cared not to part with that sample of his ship-building handiwork, the two set sail for Treasure Island one dark night, when the wind was blowing fresh.

A storm coming up, the Mezrak in tow labored so heavily that at last the black reluctantly consented to cast her loose, and with deep regret the two saw her broach to, keel over on her beam-ends, and then sink from sight.

In safety the yacht, which Merle also called the Mezrak, in spite of her beauty, for she was a beauty, reached the island, the boy proving he had not forgotten his cunning, or lost his nerve, by running her in through the break in the reef, though it was blowing a gale.

The two months and a half Merle was away from the college, were passed mostly in cruising in his yacht, until he became such an expert sailor that after losing sight of land for two days, he ran unerringly back to Treasure Island.

When it was time for him to return to the Padre's charge, Mezrak sailed in the little schooner with him to Vera Cruz, and there left him till another term had gone by, and his purse of gold was this time so well filled, that the youth was allowed to accompany the Superior upon a visit to the United States.

This was a most delightful treat for Merle, and he returned to the college, after four months' absence, with the firm determination that he would, like his father, also become an American.

At last the second term ended, and prompt to the day Mezrak was on hand in the yacht.

While Merle went on board, to greet the craft as an old and dearly loved friend, Mezrak started up into the town to purchase some necessary stores, and watching his retreating form the youth noticed a man closely observing him.

Maay, he had noticed, eyed both himself and Mezrak curiously, but this man had not the appearance of curiosity in his look and manner, for it seemed something deeper.

Merle saw him follow Mezrak up the street, and shortly after he returned, and gazed earnestly at the yacht, the boy apparently not noticing him.

Presently he got into a boat and pulled alongside:

"Want a hand, young man?" he asked as he drew near, and he gazed fixedly into the youth's face.

"No, thank you."

"You've got a trim yacht, and several messmates I have would like to ship with me on just such a craft," said the man.

"No, I need no one but myself and servant to man her."

"You can't be going far in her?"

"Yes, quite a number of leagues along the coast."

"You'll have a head wind if you run up the coast."

Merle saw that the man's remarks were of a probing nature, and he determined not to gratify his curiosity, so he answered:

"Oh, I don't mind that."

"I should think your father would be afraid to trust you out with only one slave, in as large a craft as that."

"Those who know me are not afraid to trust me in danger, and those who don't, if opportunity offers, will find I am fully able to take care of myself," was the cool reply.

"Well, you look it, my lad."

"I am sorry I cannot get a berth aboard, so good-by."

The man had spoken in pure Spanish, which Merle had learned thoroughly, during his stay with the Padres; but yet he did not look in the least like Spaniard or Mexican.

He was tall, full bearded, with dark, earnest blue eyes, and a face that was resolute, intelligent, and reckless.

He looked like a man of rank masquerading in the garb of a common sailor.

Merle continued reading, apparently, for he had a book in his hand, after the departure of the visitor; but he kept his eye upon the stranger.

First, the man stood on the shore, as though in perplexed meditation.

Then he started along the water's edge, turned, retraced his way to the boat, in which he had rowed out to the yacht, and springing in headed up the harbor.

Still watching him Merle saw him run alongside of a small fishing smack of trim build, and then, other vessels coming in, as night came on, and dropping near, he lost sight of him with eye and memory.

Soon after Mezrak returned, accompanied by peons bearing packages, the purchases he had made, and these being safely stored on board, the anchor was hauled up and the yacht was headed seaward, just as the shadows of night fell upon the land and water.

Hardly had the fleet craft left the Castle San Juan d'Uloa astern half a league, when the moon arose, and Merle's quick eye detected a sail in their wake.

"It is the very craft that fellow boarded, for I recognize her by her high taffrail and long bowsprit," he said, as he bent his glass upon her, and then he told Mezrak of the visit of the tall stranger, and the questions he had asked.

To his surprise, when he described the man Mezrak said quickly:

"Ready about, master! We will return to Vera Cruz."

CHAPTER XVI.

UNFORGOTTEN.

THOUGH Mezrak was the slave, for so he called himself, and Merle the master, the youth was accustomed to implicitly obey the black.

Mezrak had been to him as mother, father, nurse, friend and servant, and his influence over the boy was great.

He loved Merle even more than he would his

own child, and the youth returned his affection, so that the bond that bound the handsome boy and hideous giant black together was one that it would seem nothing could sever.

Instantly then, therefore, at the word of Mezrak to "ready about," Merle, who had the tiller instinctively obeyed, and the fleet craft, was the next instant dashing back under the guns of the castle, and on a course that placed the fishing-smack off her starboard quarter.

"Have you forgotten anything, Mezrak?" asked Merle with some surprise, as soon as the yacht was on another course.

"No, master."

"Why then do you put back?"

"You say that man was very tall, broad-shouldered, and had blue eyes and a long beard, master?"

"Yes, Mezrak."

"And was in the garb of a common seaman, master?"

"Yes."

"What language did he address you in?"

"Spanish."

"Nothing else?"

"Yes, I now remember he said 'good-by' in English."

"Master, I have an idea that that man is your foe and mine."

"But how have we wronged him, Mezrak?"

"I have told you of your parents, our coming to the island, and all that you are?"

"Yes."

"Well, master, the man you saw was the same in appearance as the Rais Brentford."

"But that was fourteen years ago, Mezrak."

"True, master, but I never forget a face."

"How old was the man you saw?"

"Seemingly forty, if I may judge by men of that age whom I have seen."

"The Rais was then about twenty-five, and that would nearly make it."

"If the polacca goes about, and runs back to Vera Cruz, I shall be convinced that the man was the Rais, and that he recognized me, and is on the determined hunt for the treasure."

"Let us then go on to the island, and let him dare follow us," said Merle, sternly, his anger rising at being dogged.

"Master, that man has too many to back him."

"He does not know that Valik and Toolah are dead, and following us, as he was, to the island, he has force enough to conquer us, and he knew enough of us to feel that it would be no easy matter— See! the polacca* goes about."

The moonlight now plainly revealed the vessel, that had been in the wake of the yacht a few moments before, suddenly go about, and the way she headed back toward the harbor, proved the more certainly to Mezrak that they were the objects of the attention of those on the polacca.

"Well, what are we to do, Mezrak?" quietly asked Merle.

"First, run back to our anchorage, and seem as though we had forgotten something."

"Then I will go again up to the shops, and to-morrow some boxes will be brought on board."

"Boxes, Mezrak?"

"Yes, master, and in the evening we will put to sea again."

"But I thought you made the purchases you needed?"

"I did, master, but I have since thought of something else."

"Then you don't intend to complain to the harbor-guard of yonder craft following us?"

"No, master, I shall take a better plan."

Merle saw that Mezrak was revolving some plan in his mind, and said nothing more, and soon after the yacht was again at her anchorage.

Ten minutes more and her pursuer had dropped her mud-hook, and not a cable's length away.

CHAPTER XVII.

MEZRAK'S RUSE.

WHATEVER purchases which Mezrak cared to make were promptly attended to the following morning, Merle remaining on the yacht while the Abyssinian went on shore.

During the afternoon half a dozen boxes and barrels were brought down to the landing on a cart, and a shore boat rowed them to the little vessel, where they were put in the hold.

Merle, without appearing to watch, observed that the stranger was on the fishing-smack that had followed them, for he saw his head and face several times look out of the companionway, and he was confident that any movement on board the yacht was being closely observed.

As darkness approached, Mezrak came on board, and instantly, almost, the fishing-smack got under way and stood seaward under light sail.

Shortly after the Mezrak left her anchorage and ran out to sea, Merle as before at the helm.

Upon gaining an offing the yacht saw the polacca hovering near, and at once her head was put down the coast.

Apparently bound upon her own business, the polacca also shaped her course as had the yacht, and thus the two little vessels glided along, not three quarters of a mile apart, and the Mezrak slightly gaining.

Observing this as though to keep up a pleasant rivalry in speed, those on the polacca spread more sail, and she held her own, until Mezrak ran up the fore and maintopsails on the yacht, which again shot ahead.

Thus the race continued for hours, under a stiff breeze, when ahead loomed up an island in sight.

Toward the island the yacht headed, and running closer in, it was seen that there were dangerous reefs upon all sides.

But Merle seemed to well know the channel and skillfully guided the Mezrak in to a safe anchorage.

The island was by no means a large one, and was almost barren; but dropping anchor, Mezrak drew the towing yawl of the yacht alongside and first set Merle on shore.

Then, although seemingly forgetting the polacca, he went back to the yacht and taking from the hold a box and barrel rowed them on shore also.

He seemed about to return for other stores, when suddenly in through the reef dashed a large boat containing nine men, and the polacca at anchor beyond showed from whence they had come.

Running at once to the yacht two sprung on board, and the balance rowed shoreward, where Mezrak and Merle stood awaiting them.

It was now good dawn, and Merle recognized the man at the boat's tiller as the stranger he had seen at Vera Cruz, and Mezrak said calmly:

"I was right, master."

"It is the Rais Brentford, then?"

"Yes, master."

Still, neither the boy nor the black seemed to make any effort to resist those they knew now could only be foes, and they stood in silence watching the approaching boat, while upon the deck of the yacht, gazing after their comrades, were the two men that had been left there to, apparently, take possession of the little craft.

"Aha! my ebony giant, we have met again after long years, and I have run you to your den," yelled Brentford, as the boat advanced, for he it was.

Mezrak made no reply, but as the yawl was now within a few lengths, he turned to Merle, and uttered some word which their foes did not hear.

Instantly the boy and the black drew pistols from their sashes, and fired, and in the confusion that followed, for two in the boat dropped dead, the tops of the box and barrel already landed flew off, and out sprung two men, also armed.

"Back water for your lives! They have led us into a trap," yelled Brentford, as he saw the reinforcement on shore, and at the same time turning at the shouts and shots heard on the yacht, beheld his two men left there in the clutch of four stalwart fellows in sailor garb.

The oarsmen only too willingly obeyed the order, and the boat started to retreat, returning the hot fire poured upon them, when Merle, cool as an icicle under his first fire, called out:

"Ho, the yacht!"

"Ay, ay, sir," shouted a young seaman on board.

"Up with your anchor, and stand inshore for us," rung out in the boy's clear tones.

"Ay, ay, sir," was the response, and Mezrak and Merle sprung into their boat, leaving one of their allies dead, and another wounded, upon the shore, for the fire of those in the boat had told upon them.

The yacht's anchor was at once speek, and as it stood across the little inlet, Merle and Mezrak threw themselves on board.

The yawl was now dashing out through the rocky channel, but taking the helm Merle held rapidly on after them.

"Up with that anchor there!"

"Spread every stitch of sail!" yelled Brandt Brentford to the two men left on the polacca, and with nervous hands they tried to obey.

Just as the yawl ran alongside of the polacca she swung free from her anchor and felt the wind.

But, as she fell off to the breeze, and Brentford and his men boarded upon the starboard side, the yacht was skillfully laid alongside of the polacca by Merle, and with a cheer the men followed the boy and the black upon her decks.

Brentford saw that he had two more men than the attacking force, and gaining confidence, drew his sword, and called to his comrades to bravely meet the attack.

But he was instantly confronted by Merle, who, under Mezrak's teaching, had become a master of the sword, young as he was, and the two blades came together with a clash, and almost instantly the man was disarmed by the boy.

"I hold your life, sir."

"Shall I take it, or do you surrender?" cried Merle, sternly.

Brandt Brentford was well aware that Merle spoke the truth, and as he had seen two of his men fall beneath Mezrak's huge blade, and observed that the remainder seemed cowed, he said sullenly:

"I surrender, boy, and if you are the son of a Montezuma, as you face and form show you to be, I consider it no disgrace to be defeated by you."

Merle smiled but made no reply, and five minutes after Brentford and his crew were in irons, and the polacca a prize, for Mezrak's ruse, to ship men aboard the yacht as freight, and run to another island, not the Treasure Isle, and invite attack, had proven most successful.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A TRAITOR.

"Ah, senor! this man is Brandt the Buccaneer!"

The speaker was one of the men whom Mezrak had hastily shipped in Vera Cruz, to aid in carrying out his ruse, and he addressed Merle, for instinctively all seemed to recognize the boy as the leader.

"What! this man that cruel pirate of whom I have heard so much in Vera Cruz?" said Merle, addressing the seaman, and with his eyes upon Brentford.

"I will take oath of it, senor, for I was his prisoner once."

"He is Brandt the Buccaneer," said the man in positive tones.

Merle had often heard the padres and his fellow-students speak of a red-handed rover of the Gulf, and of the Caribbean sea, who showed no mercy to man or woman, and it was hard for him to believe that he had that famous outlaw in his power.

* So called on the Mediterranean Sea.

He knew that the Mexican Government had offered a large reward for his head, and the United States also had several cruisers in search of the pirate.

To surrender the man to Mexico would gain for him gold, and what cared he for that?

To give him up to the United States would give him a name among the people he intended should be his own.

He remembered having seen an American brig-of-war in Vera Cruz, and heard her officers talking together at the hotel, and that they then spoke of sailing in a couple of days in search of the very man who was now his prisoner.

At once he determined upon his course and said, addressing Brentford:

"Are you Brandt the Buccaneer?"

The man smiled grimly, and answered:

"Be I who I may, boy, I am no fool."

"His name is Brandt Brentford, Master," said Mezrak.

"Yes, and that looks suspicious," and turning to the group of prisoners, Merle continued:

"If any one of you tell me the truth about this man I will set him free."

"I'm your man, senor, for I owe the chief a grudge for giving me the cat once, when I didn't deserve it, and as this looks like a hanging matter, I'll save my neck and speak out," said one of the men, and who was evidently an American.

"Well, what have you to say?"

"My freedom you pledge me?"

"Yes."

"On oath?"

"Yes."

"Enough. I'd have taken your word, young senor, from your face, but an oath makes it more binding."

"That man is Brandt the Buccaneer."

"He lies," cried Brentford, savagely.

"No, for a wonder I tell the truth, for I have not been given to it of late."

"Now, young senor, as I've told you this much to save my neck, I'll tell you more for gold."

"What more can you tell?"

"The gold I ask will make known just what I have to tell."

"What is your secret worth?"

"I know where the buccaneer craft is at anchor."

"Ah! this man's vessel?"

"Yes, young senor, she got badly handled in a brush with the American brig-of-war, now lying at anchor off Vera Cruz; but she managed to get away, though with splintered timbers, and a heavy loss in men, and Captain Brandt ran her into a lagoon for repairs, and went on with a few men to add to his crew in town."

"You know this?"

"I was one of the men."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, we ran in in the polacca here, which we captured off Corpus Christi, and seeing you, and recognizing your slave here, he said he could make a fortune for us all by following you, so we went off on that tack, and you see that we ran upon breakers."

"Well, my man, pilot us to the lagoon, where the buccaneer craft is at anchor, and I'll give you a thousand pesos."

"It's worth more, senor, for if I'm going to be honest, I want enough to lay the foundation."

Merle turned to Mezrak, and addressed him in the Persian tongue, and after the response of the slave he said:

"Name your price?"

"Five thousand pesos."

"I will give it to you."

"I ought to have said ten, for you'll get that for the head of Brandt from the Mexican Government, not to speak of what you'll receive from the schooner."

"Now tell me, how many men are on board the schooner?"

"Half a score."

"You are known to them?"

"Yes, young senor."

"Well, I'll use you in capturing the craft, and then you shall be at liberty and have your gold."

Turning to Mezrak again, Merle conversed with him for awhile in the Persian language, and then said:

"Now, my man, we'll go in search of the schooner, and your life is in my hands, so be careful."

"I'll be careful—never fear."

"You have betrayed your comrades, and if you play a like game with us your death will be sudden."

"Be faithful, and all will be well."

"Now come on board the polacca and act as pilot."

Ten minutes after, having gotten the wounded man from the island, and buried the dead one in the sea, the two vessels sailed away—Merle upon the polacca with three of his men and the traitor pirate, and Mezrak on the yacht with three more of their allies and the prisoners.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE PIRATE PILOT.

MERLE had kept the traitor pirate with him, determined to keep his word to him faithfully, if he proved true to him, and to kill him instantly at the first sign of treachery.

But ere they had gone half a dozen leagues under the pilotage of the buccaneer, Merle felt convinced that the man was really acting from a spirit of revenge against Brandt Brentford, and also, perhaps, with a desire to save his neck from the noose, and at the same time get a good sum in gold with which to seek other lands or seas.

After talking with the man upon the subject, and finding out just how the schooner lay, it was decided that the best plan would be to keep the yacht concealed along the coast somewhere at anchor, and then to run on in the polacca toward the mouth of the lagoon before dark, so that those on the pirate vessel could see her, and recognizing her as the little craft in which their captain sailed for Vera Cruz, be thrown off their guard.

"You can take the helm and hail the vessel as we draw near, and say the captain sent you back with a letter to the lieutenant you say is on board."

"As we touch the side we will board, and, if there are no more men than you say there are on board, the craft is ours."

"Yes, little senor, and my neck is my own, and the five thousand pesos, too?"

"Yes, you have my promise; but you are sure there are only ten men on board?"

"The officer and eight men, sir, and the negro cook, making ten men."

"Then I have no fear of the result."

"Not if you show the nerve you did in capturing us, and that giant black Satan slave of yours wields that cutlass of his about the deck as he did when he boarded the polacca."

Several others among the prisoners now told Mezrak that they would serve Merle if he would release them and promise them pardon, and the black hailed the polacca and told the youth so.

"No, I'll not trust them, Mezrak," very properly answered Merle, and the pirate pilot said:

"You are right, little senor, for they are as slippery as eels, and once they saw a chance to change the fight in favor of their comrades, they would do it."

The polacca was now headed inshore, the yacht following; and, finding a good and secluded anchorage, the anchor of the Mezrak was let go and her sails furled and all made ship-shape on board.

Mezrak and his crew, bringing the prisoners, now came aboard the polacca in a boat, and the craft was at once headed down the coast, the pirate pilot saying the mouth of the lagoon was but three leagues distant.

A fair breeze was blowing, and, standing well out, Merle so headed the craft that they

came in the offing off the mouth of the lagoon just half an hour before sunset.

The prisoners were in irons down in the hold, and the traitor pirate, Merle, Mezrak and their allies stood upon deck.

Taking the helm, the pirate headed into the mouth of the lagoon, and it was not long before the outline of a vessel was dimly seen back in the shadow of the moss hung trees.

The sun set ere the polacca entered the stream, and rapidly the shadows deepened, while, apparently recognizing the polacca, the crew on the buccaneer craft had set a light.

It was a most critical moment for Merle and his men, for failure meant death to all of them and the release of Brandt, the Buccaneer, and his men.

But the boy gloried in the excitement, and the danger had a charm for him that was most fascinating.

As they drew nearer the vessel Merle said, as he took his stand by the side of the pirate:

"Remember, my pistol presses against your heart."

"I know it, senor, but I'll not betray you."

"It will be your last act on earth if you do."

"So be it, senor."

"Mezrak, those prisoners are all safe below?" continued Merle.

"I gagged every one of them, master."

"Then be ready with your men, and when I spring on board let all follow and do their duty."

A low murmur of assent followed, and then came in clarion tones from the deck of the pirate craft:

"Ho, the polacca!"

"Ay, ay, the Scorpion," answered the pirate pilot, calmly, but in tones that reached the ears of the one that hailed, for instantly came back the words:

"Is that your sweet voice, Brail?"

"It is Brail, Lieutenant Samas."

"Where is the captain?"

"Up in Vera Cruz, senor."

"Why did he not return?"

A groan was heard below as the conversation reached the ears of the chief in irons, and he was unable to utter a word or free himself from his irons.

"He sent me down with a few men for you, for he said he did not wish you to be so short-handed."

"I am glad of it, for I feared I might be caught here like a rat in his hole and be able to offer no resistance."

All this time the polacca, hardly feeling the breeze in that tree-locked stream, was gliding slowly toward the brig.

"How many men have you brought, Brail?" again called out Samas, the pirate officer.

"Only twenty, sir."

"Please let a man catch a line fore and aft, senor."

The officer gave the necessary orders, and the next instant the polacca glided alongside of the brig, the lines were thrown and caught by the pirates, and springing upon deck by the side of the man who had led him there, Merle cried in trumpet tones:

"Now, men, do your duty."

CHAPTER XX.

WINNING HIS SPURS.

STARTING back at the ringing cry of Merle, the pirate officer found himself confronted by a slender form, while a sword was held at his heart.

To surrender meant death at the yard-arm he well knew, and a quick glance showing him the paucity of Merle's force, he determined to resist, and yelled out, as he sprung backward several paces:

"Cut the dogs down, huds!"

As he sprung backward he had quickly wrenched his sword from its scabbard, and the next instant his blade crossed Merle's.

So quickly had all this occurred that the weapons met ere a shot had been fired, on either side, and before all of the attacking force had really gained the pirate deck.

But, with the second savage clash of the blades of the leaders, came a shot from the pirate pilot, at a former comrade, and at the same instant the huge cimeter of Mezrak cut a buccaneer down.

When he first met the blade of Merle, the pirate officer, seeing that a mere stripling opposed him, expected to make short work of him; but to his instant surprise, he found he was matched by a skillful swordsman, boy though he was.

Almost at once Merle pressed him so hard that he drove him step by step backward across the deck.

The fight was raging around him savagely, and Merle could, by his deadly marksmanship, have picked off a foe or two, ere he engaged the buccaneer officer; but he looked for the highest game and that he was determined to hunt down.

Seeing that he could not kill his enemy with his sword, the pirate dropped his hand to his belt to draw a pistol, and at once the act was fatal to him, as seeing it, Merle knocked down the guard of his adversary, and drove his keen blade through his body.

A cry burst from the lips of the buccaneer and he sunk to the deck a corpse, just as a warning cry came from the pirate pilot.

Turning quickly, Merle beheld coming over the bulwarks, from the deck of the polacca, Brandt the Buccaneer and his men, the irons upon them held firmly as weapons.

Instantly he cried to Mezrak a warning, and the freed buccaneers were met bravely and hurled back upon the deck of the polacca, and again secured, though two of them lost their lives in the struggle, one by the hand of Merle, and the other from a cimeter blow given by the giant Abyssinian, who never wounded a foe.

Then the youth glanced around him and saw that the brig was won, and his heart beat with pride at his achievement, as Mezrak said:

"My master is worthy of his father, the Sidi."

A consultation was then held, and, as the breeze was light, Merle decided to at once stand out of the lagoon with the schooner, while Brail, the traitor pirate, went in the polacca with one of the men to Vera Cruz, and carried a letter to the captain of the American cruiser at anchor there.

"I'll carry the letter, senor, but if you surrender Captain Brandt to the Mexican Government you'll get the ten thousand pesos offered as a reward for his head," said Brail.

"I care not for the reward, so take the letter to the commander of the American cruiser," replied Merle.

"Yes, senor," and Brail marveled greatly as he looked at Merle that he should so readily throw away so rich a reward.

Going into the cabin of the buccaneer craft, Merle wrote:

"To the Commander of the American Cruiser Sea Wolf: Sir: If you desire to have delivered into your hands Captain Brandt, the Buccaneer, and his brig, the Scorpion, run out to sea upon receipt of this letter, and meet me fifteen leagues down the coast and two leagues off-shore. With respect,

MERLE MONTE."

This letter was given to Brail, who, having also received from Mezrak the promised reward, at once set sail for Vera Cruz, the man accompanying him being ordered to anchor the craft in the harbor and remain in charge of it until his comrades then on the buccaneer craft should return, when they might have it in common for the services they had rendered.

Shortly after the polacca departed, the Scorpion was towed out of the lagoon, and with his small crew manning the vessel, Merle stood off and on until dawn, when he headed toward the rendezvous appointed with the cruiser, going by on the way to pick up his yacht, which remained safely at anchor where he had left it.

It was late in the afternoon before the cheering cry came from one of the men, of—

"Sail ho!"

Then around a point of land dashed the

cruiser, coming along merrily under a press of sail.

As she drew nearer it could be seen that the men were at their guns, ready for action, and astern of the cutter was now visible, driven under a tremendous pressure of canvas, the polacca, with fully a dozen seamen upon her decks.

As the cruiser drew nearer, Merle luffed up and lay to, and Mezrak on the yacht followed suit, and the two vessels lay quietly awaiting the coming of the American.

Running down within a cable's length of the Scorpion, the cruiser also luffed up into the wind, and a stern voice hailed:

"Ho the brig!"

"Ay, ay, sir."

"Is that the buccaneer craft Scorpion?"

"Ay, ay, sir," again answered Merle; and a cheer broke from the American crew.

"Is Senor Merle Monte on the brig?"

"Yes."

"I will come on board and visit him."

As though still prepared for treachery, should any be meditated, the crew of the cruiser still remained at their guns, and a boat, filled with marines, and with two officers in the stern-sheets, put off from her side and headed for the Scorpion.

It was certainly a surprise to the American officers to be met at the gangway by a mere boy, dressed in sailor garb, and to observe that there were but four men visible upon the buccaneer's deck.

"I would see the Senor Monte, my lad," said Captain Mayo Meredith, of the Sea Wolf.

"My name is Merle Monte, sir," said Merle, modestly.

"You! impossible!"

"I am Merle Monte, sir."

"And you wrote me this letter?"

"I did, sir."

"And are the captor of this craft?"

"With the aid of a few men, yes, sir."

"And of Brandt, the Buccaneer, you state in your letter."

"Yes."

"This is certainly the Scorpion, for I have chased the craft often enough to know; but where is the buccaneer chief?"

"In the cabin, sir, a prisoner, with five of his men."

"There is some strange mystery in all this, my lad."

"None, sir, for accident put it in my way to capture Brandt, the Buccaneer, through a plan formed by my slave, Mezrak, and, one of his men proving traitor, I was enabled to also get possession of the Scorpion."

"Senor Monte, you have done a brave man's work, though you seem to be but a boy in years; but pardon me if I ask a direct question," and Captain Meredith seemed confused.

"Certainly, sir, I will answer you."

"Are you in reality a boy?"

"I do not understand you, sir."

"Again pardon me, but your very beautiful face and slender, graceful form lead me to suspect that you are—"

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Merle; "you mistook me for a young girl."

"I did, I frankly confess, and do."

"No, sir, I am no girl, but a boy, I assure you, captain, as Mezrak can vouch for."

"You are a Mexican, from your name, and yet—"

"I am not a Mexican, sir, but I have a home on the coast, and was returning with Mezrak to that home when chance led Brandt, the Buccaneer, into my power."

"Your English is perfect, and I hope you are an American," continued Captain Meredith, more and more interested in the mysterious youth.

"I was born at sea, sir, but I am an American in heart, as my father was before me, and for that reason I surrendered this vessel and her captain to you."

"And thereby threw away ten thousand dollars which the Mexicans would have given you for Brandt's head."

"I care not for the money, captain, and the vessel and her buccaneer chief are yours; but I must beg you to release my messenger, whom I see you have brought back with you."

"Yes, I was not certain it was not a trap, so brought him along as a hostage."

"He is free to go."

"Then come with me, Brail, and I will land you in safety, while these other men who have served me can take the polacca and return to Vera Cruz," said Merle, and the face of the heretofore alarmed traitor pirate brightened at his words.

"But, my dear young sir, you have won your spurs by the capture of a man and his vessel that have eluded the cruisers for two years, and, as you seem to be a seaman, I shall not take the honor of the capture from you, but give you a prize cruise and send you to the United States as second in command of the prize."

"If you do not get a middy's warrant for your gallant act, you will have served a most thankless Government."

Merle's face flushed with pleasure, and he turned to Mezrak, who had run the yacht alongside and come on board.

The Abyssinian understood the boy's look and addressed him in the Persian tongue, which turned the eyes of all upon the black.

A few words passed between the boy and the slave, and then Merle said:

"I thank you, sir; but can Mezrak accompany me, for he has done as much as I have to capture the pirate?"

"Who is Mezrak?"

"My Abyssinian slave here."

"Yes, if you wish it, he can go."

"Thank you, sir," and after escorting Captain Meredith to the cabin where Brandt and the other prisoners were confined in irons, Merle held a long conversation with Mezrak, the result of which was that the boy determined to go in the Scorpion to the United States, and the black was to accompany him, while the yacht was given in charge of Captain Meredith, who promised to put a middy and several men on board to run it back to Vera Cruz, where it was to be left in charge of the Padre Superior of the college, subject to the youth claiming it at will.

The polacca, which Merle had given to his faithful allies in the capture of the pirates, soon after departed, with each one on board happy with a golden souvenir given them by Mezrak, and just at sunset the cruiser and the yacht headed back to Vera Cruz, while the Scorpion, with a prize crew on board, and Merle as acting junior officer, and the bearer of dispatches from Captain Meredith to the Government of the United States, spread her huge sails and flew over the blue waters of the Gulf.

CHAPTER XXI.

MERLE, THE MIDDY.

In good time the Scorpion ran up the beautiful Potomac and dropped anchor in front of Washington.

Those were not the days of telegraphs and steam-engines, and consequently her coming had not been heralded weeks before her arrival.

As she glided by the different vessels of war at anchor in the river many an eye was admiringly turned upon the beautiful craft, and several old tars, who had lately returned from cruising in the Indies, said:

"If that lively craft don't turn out to be the pirate Scorpion, then I'll stop my grog for a month o' Sundays."

"And it's promotion to the officer who has capter'd her, ef she be ther brig o' Brandt the Buccaneer," responded another knowing one.

Delighted at all he saw, and proud at being in the United States, Merle stood on the deck watching the Potomac's shores, the vessels in the river, the distant city crowned by the capitol, and charmed with all that met his gaze.

"We anchor there, Mr. Monte, and as you

bear the dispatches, I will have you sent at once ashore, and Midshipman Nevitte can show you the way to the home of the Secretary of the Navy," said the lieutenant in command, and who had taken a great fancy to the mysterious youth during the voyage from the Gulf.

Armed with his dispatches, and attired simply in a sailor suit, for he declined the kind loan of a middy's dress offered him by Midshipman Nevitte, for he said he had no right to wear it, Merle went to the home of the Secretary of the Navy, and gaining an audience, delivered his dispatches.

The Honorable Secretary read them with deep interest and pleasure, and grasping Merle's hand, said warmly:

"My fine lad, you have done what a number of our captains have failed to do, and, as Meredith says, you are fully entitled to a midshipman's berth in our navy, and the President will give it to you gladly, I know, for I will present you to His Excellency, and urge it with these dispatches."

The Honorable Secretary was as good as his word, and the President not only appointed Merle a midshipman, but ordered him back to Vera Cruz, to join Captain Meredith on the Sea Wolf, and as the bearer of important dispatches to American officers serving in the Gulf.

After a week's stay in Washington, Merle, accompanied by the faithful Mezrak, and dressed in a new middy's uniform, departed by stage for Baltimore, where he was to take a packet-ship for New Orleans, from whence he could take another vessel to Vera Cruz.

Arriving at Baltimore, Merle found a swift-sailing brig was to sail the following day, and he at once secured passage on board for himself and Mezrak.

The vessel sailed on time, and Merle saw that she carried but few passengers, though her cargo was one of great value, so the captain confidentially informed him, seeing that he was a naval officer, adding:

"I make the run with more confidence, now that Brandt the Buccaneer is captured.

"That was a gallant youngster that captured him, and he deserves the middy's berth the President gave him, and the papers are making a hero of him, and it is right they should."

Merle blushed and turned away; but it soon leaked out, through the purser, that he was the famous Merle the Middy, and he at once found himself a sea-lion on board the brig, a notoriety his retiring nature caused him to shrink from, while Mezrak by no means regarded with equanimity the attention his *outré* form and black face attracted, and wished himself and master well back upon Treasure Island.

CHAPTER XXII.

A LEAP FOR LIFE.

AMONG the passengers on the Neptune, which was the name of the brig on which Merle and Mezrak took passage to New Orleans, was a padre who seemed to be anxious to cultivate the friendship of the youth.

But Merle did not like his face, in spite of his holy garb, and he was no person to pretend friendship for one he disliked, and he persistently shunned the priest and all of his party, which consisted of several brother padres and half a dozen Sisters of Charity, who were all going to the convent in New Orleans, they said.

Mezrak had also taken a particular aversion to the oily-faced padre, and told Merle there was that in his face which made him believe him a wicked man.

"Oh, he's a wolf in lamb's clothing, Mezrak, you may depend upon it," said Merle to his "shadow," as those on board the brig had named the black.

For awhile all went along well, and the swift-sailing vessel, with fair breezes was

making a good run of it, when Abaco was sighted.

At the first view of the Hole in the Wall the padre and his party congregated upon the quarter-deck and conversed together in a low tone, while Merle and Mezrak, who were forward at the time, stood watching them.

Presently, without the slightest warning, or a suspicion of evil having entered the minds of the passengers, the padre suddenly threw off his priestly robe and a man in sailor garb was revealed.

A man, too, who was armed with sword and pistols, as was also the whole party of supposed padres and Sisters of Charity, and who now were unmasked as desperate men.

Like an avalanche they swept down upon the passengers and crew of the brig alike, and in an instant the vessel was in their power.

"It is Brandt, the Buccaneer," cried Mezrak in his own tongue.

At the same instant Merle had recognized the daring chief, and both he and Mezrak saw at a glance that resistance was now useless.

"Take those two devils, for I have a debt to settle with them," yelled Brandt Brentford in stentorian tones, and half a dozen of his men sprung forward to obey.

Merle and Mezrak were both calm, and had determined to sell their lives dearly, when suddenly the black cried:

"Up into the rigging, master."

Instantly Merle obeyed, and with wonderful rapidity and agility the two made their way up to the fore cross-trees.

"After the white imp and black devil," yelled Brandt, and after them came his men.

Then Merle saw what Mezrak's quick eye had discovered—a loop-hole of escape.

The brig was gliding slowly along in deep water, and not five fathoms from a rocky island, the high cliff of which almost overhung the decks.

She was approaching a point where she must luff sharp, and Merle saw that as she did so the end of the heavy yard must almost touch the jagged rocks, for, left for a moment during the seizure by the pirates without a helmsman, the brig had drifted nearer inshore than was safe, and when at last one of Brandt's crew did spring to the wheel, he saw that he must let her pass by the end of the island before he dared luff.

At a glance, as they bounded upon the yard, Brandt also saw the plan of escape so hastily formed by Mezrak and Merle, and he yelled, savagely:

"Luff! luff sharp! curse you, helmsman!"

The man tried to obey, and, with nimble foot, Merle ran along the yard, followed by Mezrak, while up the rigging after them came half a dozen buccaneers, their long knives in their teeth, while Brandt emptied his pistol at them from below.

"A thousand dollars each for the life of that boy and black hound," shouted Brandt, the Buccaneer, in frenzied tones from the deck.

But, reaching the end of the yard just as the brig began to luff in answer to her helm, Merle glanced back, and crying out, "Come, Mezrak," made the leap for life.

An instant he was poised in the air, and then lighted upon the rock in safety.

The next instant, with a mighty bound, Mezrak also made the leap for life, and having further to jump, as the brig was swinging off, his foot just touched the edge of the rock.

But, with a strength he had not believed he possessed, Merle grasped him by the outstretched hand and dragged him forward. His foot slipped and he fell upon the rock half his length, but Merle held him with iron gripe and saved his life.

Springing to his feet Mezrak drew Merle back from the edge of the cliff just in time to escape a volley of musketry from the deck of the brig, while there also rung in their ears the cheers of the imprisoned passengers and crew at their daring escape.

As Merle and Mezrak moved away to seek a place of safety, they suddenly started back at

discovering several rough-looking men approaching them along a rocky path upon the top of the cliff.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE WRECKERS.

It was very evident that the four men, whom Merle and Mezrak saw, were as much surprised as they were, at seeing them, for they halted at sight of the youth and black, and communed excitedly together, as though by no means understanding their uncere- monious invasion of the island.

In his cruise North on the Scorpion, Merle had heard from his brother officers of a band of wreckers who infested many of the Bahama islands, and by displaying false beacons on stormy nights lured vessels to destruction.

He knew also that the United States had sent vessels especially to hunt out these inhuman wretches, and after a closer look at those in his front he did not doubt but that they were some of the gang.

"They are undoubtedly wreckers, Mezrak, and if so, worse than pirates, for they risk nothing to get gold, so let us beware," he said.

"There are only four," said Mezrak, calmly.

"Yes, and we are not armed, for I fired my last shot on the brig."

"Mezrak is armed, master," was the low reply, and the slave took from the bosom of his dress a pair of pistols and handed them to Merle, while he drew from the folds of his full trousers a short cimeter.

The wreckers also had weapons in their hands, but seemed considerably dismayed at the sight of Mezrak.

"Who are you, senors?" asked one of the wreckers.

But as he spoke he fell dead, and the shot came from on board the brig, which had stood off some little distance and fired a volley of musketry over the top of the cliff.

Taking advantage of this unexpected attack, Merle cried:

"Come, Mezrak, now upon them."

Panic-stricken, the wreckers turned to fly, when a second of their number fell by a shot from Merle's pistol, and driven mad, like hunted stags, the other two turned and stood at bay, firing a shot that brought Merle down.

With a cry of frenzy, Mezrak bounded forward, and unhurt by the fire of his foes, rushed upon them like an enraged tiger, and unmindful of their resistance, seized one and then the other in his iron grasp, and drove his blade deep into their hearts.

Throwing them aside as worthy of no further notice, he ran back to Merle, whom he found seated upon the ground, coolly examining a bullet-wound in the calf of his leg.

"Oh, master, you are wounded!" cried Mezrak, in trembling tones.

"And you avenged me, good Mezrak; but it is only slight, so do not worry, but bind it up for me."

The black at once took the youth in his arms and went further into the island, until he came to a spring of clear water.

Then he carefully dressed the wound, saw that the ball had cut its way out, and neither hurt the bone or cut an artery, and said:

"I am happy, master, that it is no worse. Rest here, while I go and see if the brig has gone on and if there are more of these wretches on the island."

For an hour Mezrak was gone, while Merle calmly went to sleep in the cool shade of a tree, and then he returned with the report that the brig had sailed on, and was over a league away, and that he had found, anchored in a small basin near by, a small sloop of about fifteen tons burden, and a man on board.

"Where is he, Mezrak?"

"Allah has him in his keeping, master," was the significant reply.

"Then we have a way to leave this island?" eagerly said Merle.

"Yes, master."

Mezrak then carried Merle down to the shore, for he would not allow him to put foot to the ground, and the two were soon on board the sloop.

It was evidently built with an eye to sea-going qualities and speed, and an examination soon revealed several casks of oil on board, some mirrors, and other articles that were evidently used in rigging false beacons.

Plenty of provisions were also found, and contented on that score, Mezrak left Merle in charge, while he again made a tour of the island.

It was a long time before he returned, and then he came back bearing a large, ingeniously-made beacon, which he had taken from a hole in the rocks.

"Well, Mezrak, we have done some good by landing here, and we have a good craft which we can make Vera Cruz in, if I am not very much mistaken," said Merle.

"We can but try it, master, and I heard the officers say of you that you could navigate a ship to China, and I don't hesitate to say start for Mexico whenever you are ready."

As it would be a hard trip, and the sloop had ample stores on board, Merle concluded to wait until his wound was recovered sufficiently for him to be of more use, and they consequently remained at the island for several weeks.

At last however Merle said he felt no pain from his wound, and the little sloop was headed for the Gulf.

It was a rough and hard voyage, but at last Treasure Island came in sight, and after a rest there of several days, the sloop set sail once more, and her course was laid for Vera Cruz, for Merle was anxious to deliver his dispatches, which, having with him the day of the seizure of the brig, he had not lost.

To his delight Merle found the Sea Wolf in port and when he went up over the gangway, Captain Meredith started as though he had seen a white and a black ghost.

"Well! I deemed you dead, my gallant boy, for I learned at Havana, on our last cruise, of the escape of Brandt the Buccaneer at Washington, through the aid of a marine guard he bribed, and of his joining the brig, on which he had a number of his men, who had gone on to return in her as passengers and capture her," said Captain Meredith.

"Yes, sir, and he most cleverly did capture her, and the surprise was so great no resistance really could be offered; but Mezrak and myself escaped, and I bear dispatches to you from the President and the Secretary."

"I heard that you attempted a most daring escape, and were both killed, and I so reported."

"No, sir, I am here as you see, and we made a discovery that I will make known to you," and Merle delivered his dispatches, and then made known his discoveries on Wrecker's Island, the death of five of the band, and capture of the sloop, in which they had come to Vera Cruz."

"Merle, I am proud of you, and that should win you another promotion to Passed Midshipman."

"I am delighted to see you are ordered to my vessel and—"

"And Mezrak, sir?"

"Oh, he shall come too."

"And, my brave boy, I predict for you a noble future."

From that day Merle entered upon his duties as a midshipman on the Sea Wolf, and his "shadow" remained with him; but, whether the prediction of Captain Meredith came true or not, kind reader, the sequel to my romance will show: "The Mutineer Midshipman; or, Brandt the Buccaneer." A sequel to "Merle, the Middy."

THE END.

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